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LOVE STORY

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THELMA WOODHILL

LOVE STORY

LONDON
VICTOR GOLLANCZ LTD
14 Henrietta Street Covent Garden
1929

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BOOK ONE
THE BARNETS

CHAPTER I

Martha Barnet woke, turned, and regarded her sleeping husband somewhat affectionately. Henry was as methodical about coming to life mornings as about everything else. At seven he would reach for his watch, poke a finger through the lace of the pillow slip and smother an exclamation. Looking at the time, he would snap his watch-case softly, and try to get out of bed like an eel.

Henry thought she needed a morning nap. In the early eighties women were held to be weak vessels, easily shattered. Four years of marriage with Martha, of sleeping beside her firm body and drooping behind her in the robust pleasures of a small California city, had in no wise conveyed to him that she was made of durable stuff.

In some ways this struck Martha as all wrong. In others she thought it was a good idea. Since wives had to be dependent, the weapon of delicacy was useful. She couldn't swear to it, but she had a fairly substantial notion that most of the seal-skin sacques worn by her friends in winter had followed fainting fits or threats of general decline.

Martha had never had to resort to fainting or declining. But simply because a soldier hasn't been called to action is no reason for him to throw his ammunition away. It was well for Henry to continue in his blindness regarding her strength. Even fictitious frailty gave a woman power, and no woman could tell when she might need that.

Even Martha couldn't tell. Henry owned Barnet's Paint and Glass Store on Court House Square, and he wasn't abnormally stingy. Of course, present him with a major proposition for clothes or furniture, and he tried to wriggle out of his responsibilities. Then the thing to do was to go ahead, order what was required, and send the bills to the store. Henry always paid bills.

Eyeing the red-patterned tape that bound the collar of her husband's night-shirt, Martha felt a strong inclination to poke him in the ribs and apprise him of a momentous suspicion she entertained concerning herself. He would be overwhelmed. But he sent up such sonorous tidings of the oblivion in which he reposed that she desisted.

Anyway she couldn't be sure. Having been raised in the twilight between fact and fancy peculiar to the era, biology wasn't the subject she knew most about, and the tradition that she was generally right being nicely established in the house, it would be a pity to take a chance on being wrong. She'd better wait and make sure when Belle Winters came that afternoon. Belle had had Stella the year before, and ought to know.

Turning from contemplation of the night-shirt, Martha viewed her immediate surroundings in the mirror before which it was her custom to dress. She saw a room filled with towering walnut furniture and carpeted sumptuously to the walls. Her mind travelled out of the room to the whole house, visioning plate-glass windows, porte cochère, chandeliers from San Francisco and all. She'd done fairly well, starting as a poor girl with nothing but her own initiative to back her, to arrive at a house like that, and a husband who was reasonably satisfactory, as husbands went.

At seven Henry did what she had known he would do. Through lowered lids she watched him in the mirror. Sliding from the sheets, he screened himself behind a tall chair. Wasn't he funny ? She clothed herself before a looking-glass, but Henry fixed a chair at night so that he could even arrange his necktie next morning without coming fully into view.

Before descending for breakfast, he crept from ambuscade and spread his night-shirt over her feet. It was August, and the chill which had fallen from the mountains during the night was already gone. However, a ceremonial of Henry's cult of women's fragility required spreading his night-shirt over his wife's feet when he had risen.

Thoroughly healthy, Martha was also thoroughly luxurious. She stayed in bed that morning, pretending to sleep, and planning a little play that should be staged for Henry after Belle had brought in a favourable verdict in the afternoon.

Half an hour before school time Lettie went downstairs. Lettie was the little sister who represented all Martha had brought with her in the way of dowry when she married. She loved Lettie with a kind of swelling emotion. But, all said and done, a girl was only a girl. What a woman needed to round out her life and set her off was a son.

Martha was down and dressed and tolerably gay when Henry came at noon for dinner. But Henry acted queer, almost crestfallen. Refusing his floating island dessert he rose nervously.

" Emmons is coming to the store," he offered in explanation of his haste. " I went to the First National this morning to see about some notes, and Emmons said he'd be over at one."

No novice at wifely devices, Martha resorted to the sideboard.

" If you won't eat, drink some port," she said.

Henry took the glass and gulped, saying :

" Thanks, I needed that."

" The acacias you planted are growing," she remarked. " It looks as though they'd bloom next year."

Henry's eyes thanked her again. He was fond of the little acacia trees.

Belle arrived promptly at two. Being years ahead of the times in some ways, Martha asked her questions directly and immediately. And being years behind them in all ways, Belle answered frankly. They even used the right words for things—a practice not widely indulged in by ladies of the period.

" It will be a boy," Martha asserted. " I'll call him——"

Henry and Joseph suggested themselves as names. Much

could be said in favour of Henry, but it had blurred edges, lacking in clear sounds. The worst feature of Joseph was that her father had been called Joseph—and never amounted to much. Casting about for enterprising citizens within her ken, she hit upon Columbus.

" I'll call him Christopher," she said.

" Better make it Christopher Christine for the present," Belle advised. " There's no way to be sure. Before Stella came——"

" Christopher," Martha repeated. " What would I want of another girl ? I have Lettie already."

Belle saw the force of the argument. If Martha was set on a boy, her child's sex was already as fixed as though the doctor had gone down to Henry waiting in the parlour and announced, " There's a fine son upstairs hollering for you, Hank."

" Stella's so cunning." Belle put in a word for girls. " Yesterday when I wheeled her out, Leila Michelson was taking Eddie for a walk. We lifted him in with her, and you should have seen how cute they played."

Martha rose with a glitter of bronze passementerie. There were some subjects she wouldn't discuss, and Leila Michelson was one of them. Marrying well was legitimate. She'd done it herself, but she'd followed all the rules. Maybe Leila had, and maybe she hadn't. Rumours of a visit to Gus Michelson by Leila's father—some said with a shot-gun—were not to be overlooked ; nor the circumstantial evidence of a hurried wedding and young Eddie produced in the scandalous haste of seven months.

" I must think of clothes," she said to divert the discussion.

At the moment she meant clothes for herself. Baby garments could come later. No one was more adept with a needle than Martha, and she had a wholesome desire to sew her baby clothes herself.

On his way to dinner Henry had stopped at the post-office and brought home the current number of *Harper's*

Bazaar. Rolling back the springy pages of the journal, she motioned Belle over on the sofa and sat down beside her. Their two heads touched over the magazine, and their two pairs of hands turned leaves. *Harper's* was a broken reed to lean upon. Copious above the belt, and voluminous below, the moulds of fashion presented were obviously corseted to the gasping point.

Narrow columns of advertising on two inside pages were equally barren. " Light Running Domestic Sewing Machines," " The Lotta Bustle," and a daring recommendation for " Nestlé's Lactic Farina, the Mother's Milk Substitute," were the best they had to offer. Martha already owned a sewing machine and sufficient bustles, and she wasn't going to require substitutes for anything—ever.

She breathed angrily, her sense of drama offended. Here was she, Martha Barnet, in an interesting condition, and the accredited authority on female fashion and instruction made nothing of it.

" I refuse to be cramped," she said. " No matter what they're wearing, I refuse to be cramped. I'll make up my own patterns and look well too—you'll see. I'm built right, and I won't be cramped. He's got to be strong."

Ideas sprang, full-born in her mind. She would have tea-gowns with lace fronts for the house, and dolmans for the street. It was lucky, as everything was lucky for her, that wraps would be in order when she needed them. There was a man dressmaker in San Francisco who did gorgeous dolmans, and another firm which specialised in tea-gowns.

As soon as Belle left, Martha ran to her room to tidy up before going down-town. Her hair was black and thick and inclined to spring back from the brush in waves. Smoothing it, her grey eyes darkened with excitement. *Harper's Bazaar* might be unaware of the theatrical qualities of the moment, but she wasn't. Henry should be informed according to formula when he arrived home at night.

On the way out she remembered that Lettie might be in

the way, and called to the kitchen. The half-breed hired girl responded with mingled red-man resistance and white-man curiosity.

" Put something in the oven to keep hot," Martha ordered, " and pack up a lunch for you and Lettie to take to the orchard for a picnic at supper time. It will stay light late to-night."

Driving down-town was meat and drink to Martha. Occasionally on the way she noticed the glory of foothills and mountains behind El Stancias, and wondered how objects as remote and useless as mountains got talked about so much. But mostly she exulted in the sharp trot of her horse down the steep street, the good tug of reins in her hands, and the flash and spin of her polished buggy in windows on the way.

Barnet's Paint and Glass Store fronted the Square. To dash by it was to know that the world had substance, and why every merchant in town catered to her trade. She loved buying. She loved colour and resilient fabrics, and the sensuous rasp of lengths of silk being measured off.

Mountains went unnoticed that day. She did not even listen to the sound of silk. Her purchases at the Daylight Store consisted of a piece of nainsook and a small pattern. Arriving home for supper, Henry found her sewing in the parlour.

" Hello," he said strangely, without looking anywhere in particular. " Hot for this time of day. Care if I open another sash ? "

He always said sash. Martha felt a surge of anger towards him. Her husband was as stupid as *Harper's.* The window he lifted was a long one, extending to the floor. After bending down he didn't straighten again entirely, but remained looking out, sagging into the crimson plush drape at the side. He looked somehow hang-dog, and Martha had scant use for hang-dog men.

" Supper ready ? " he asked out the window, " I've got to talk to you about something. Can't we have supper now,

and send Lettie off with a book, so's to have the evening to ourselves ? "

Martha continued the motions of sewing, but her actual activity was the mental one of seeing Henry as a disappointment. There were pepperings of grey in his hair, and his shoulders sloped. He'd had plenty of get-up-and-go as a bachelor, but as a married man he was sliding downhill.

" Lettie and the girl are having a picnic in the orchard." She curbed the natural resonance of her voice into dry, hard tonelessness. " I sent them. There's something I want to talk over myself, and if you had the eyes of a bat——"

" That makes two of us." Henry moved lifelessly and sank into a chair. " You go first. What's the news ? "

He specialised in unavailing attempts at humour. They frequently irritated his wife. She liked fun—but it had to be fun you could laugh at—not just twists of voice. Rising to her handsome height, she spilled the sewing and upset her work-basket.

" Oh, nothing much," she said majestically. " Only that I'm going to have a baby. That's all."

" Look here, Martha——" Henry's fingers dug into the fat upholstery of his chair as he pushed himself up. " It's—it's no time for jokes. We've gone four years. It couldn't be that now—right now——"

" I could kill you ! " Martha's train whipped and tumbled as she paced the floor. " What kind of man are you, to take it the way you do ? Aren't you glad ? If anyone has a right to look sick, it's me. I'll have the suffering to do, and the months of being a fright. I'll have the trouble afterward, and——"

He came to her, instantly abject. Pacing beside her he tried to take her hands.

" Don't trot ! " She pushed him away. " If you could see yourself when you trot ! "

" Martha," he begged. " Martha—please ! I ought to be shot. It's just that the time is wrong. We can't help that, I know. We'll have to make the best of it. But you—I've

thought of you all day—been nearly crazy thinking of you and trying to see how I could make it easy for you to cut down, and——"

"Cut down?" She stopped in her tracks, confronted with a nameless menace. It lost its namelessness and became Henry. Henry threatened her—not only her but her child. Every reckless and ruthless energy she had entered combat for herself and her child.

"Cut down?" she repeated. "Who says we have to cut down?"

He reached for her hands, but she locked them behind her.

"Who says we have to cut down?" she demanded.

"Come where we can talk." Henry patted a beaded cushion on the sofa. She stood where she was and he went to her again. "I love you," he offered, as though that had any pertinence. "You know I love you. You're the finest-looking woman I ever saw and the most capable and the most alive. If there'd been anything in me, you'd have brought it out. I've known that from the start. It's why I've let you go your own way, and why I've taken money I shouldn't from the business, and all the rest."

"If you regret having supported your wife——"

"I don't." A flash of irascibility lighted itself, and immediately died out. "What I've given you has been poor payment for all you've given me. I see other men married to old maids who'll always be old maids if they live to a thousand and get in the family way every year——"

"Be decent if you can."

"I am. I look at them, and then at you——"

"Who said we had to cut down?"

"Please." He tried the sofa and the cushion again. "We've got to talk."

When she refused both him and the sofa, he returned to the window. Outside was the lawn with the little acacia trees, and beyond that the orchard with Lettie and the hired girl under the trees. Lettie was pretty. Close up or far off,

Lettie was pretty—like a picture cut from a book. His gaze went to the hills shadowing the orchard. Beautiful, brave hills they were, breasting up to the chilled blades of the Sierras. Below them lay the little city that he loved, savage yet with its heritage from the brutal days of gold, and civilised to a cruelty more brutal than its savagery had ever been.

" I've got to haul in my horns," he said at length. " Emmons was in the store from noon-time on—talking."

" Emmons ! " Martha made derision of the name. " He has a lot of call to talk to you, hasn't he ? Who was Will Emmons before he married and got the bank from his father-in-law ? "

" I'm afraid who he was and how he got the bank aren't important now." Henry was getting control of his vocal chords. " We must be reasonable, Martha. Nothing but reason and buckling down is going to help us out of the hole we're in."

" Will Emmons ! " Martha dismissed reason hotly. " I see myself taking orders from Will Emmons. My people were poor, but they were pioneers at any rate, and so were yours. I'd as soon knuckle under to Gus Michelson with his strumpet of a wife——"

" Please——"

" Oh, I know the word, and plenty of others. If a woman can't talk to her husband——"

" Of course you can talk to me. But Gus is my friend, and so is Emmons. It won't do any good to fly off the handle and call names. We've got to reason. Emmons was reasonable this afternoon and considerate. He could have sent a clerk, but he came himself, and went over my books and showed how I could trim——"

" I know where he said to trim. At home. And good reason. He's jealous. He's president of the bank, and your house is better than his, and your wife knows what's done. When we have company we don't duck off into the hills and haul home a couple of gallons of raw red wine in the back of the

surrey. We have sherry with the soup, and champagne with the roast, and brandy afterward. Emmons has plenty of room to tell you to trim. There never was a man with his cut of features who didn't sneak. Well, one thing sure, he'll run into trouble if he comes here trying to talk to me. I'm going to live right and have my baby right, no matter what it costs."

" We'll have to do for the baby, of course——"

" No matter what it costs. To begin with, you can get me a decent carriage and a man to drive. No Will Emmons is going to dictate to me or keep me riding in a jumpy buggy when I've got a baby to look out for."

" I'm afraid it isn't a question of dictating." Henry spoke deliberately. " There's the store. I've got to raise cash some way to pay off outstanding notes before I can get more credit."

" Go ahead. Raise cash. The store is your business. The house is mine."

" But——" Henry held to the tasselled curtain cord as to a rope. " But—that's it. Emmons suggested we sell the house. Gus has made a go of the insurance company, and'll buy it. He came to-day and made an offer. He'll assume the mortgage and pay a lump sum besides. I'll be glad to get even that much interest off my back." His voice dropped. " Interest is eating me up."

Martha stared with hard, incredulous eyes.

" And you ! " she breathed. " You let Gus Michelson stand before you and talk of bringing that red-headed harlot into the home sacred to your wife ! Instead of rising up like a man and booting him out of the store, you let him talk ! If I'd ever been told that my husband——"

Bodily twitchings assailed her. She fell forward to the sofa and convulsions shook her shoulders. It was Martha Barnet's first essay at hysterics in a crisis, but not her last. The doctor was called. Lettie and the hired girl heard cries and ran in from the orchard. The half-breed grunted, and Lettie whimpered. It took all of them, Henry, Lettie, the

doctor and the half-breed to get the sufferer to bed and quiet her. That night was the beginning of Lettie's intimidation and Henry's abasement. When the others were gone from the sick-room, he knelt beside the bed.

" If there was anything in God's world I could do," he whispered. " Any way I could turn. The boy from the store can drive you—business is slow since the Daylight took to selling paint—seems like the old special lines are being swallowed by these new department stores—but the new rig, I don't see how that's coming. I'm kind of caught. I don't see clear. But I love you. It's all I can say—just that I love you."

Wanting to sleep and be through with annoyances, Martha assumed the rôle of deeply wronged, but forbearing wife.

" We must think of him, and what's for his good," she murmured. " We must think of our son, and be sure he's fine and strong——"

When her voice trailed out, Henry still knelt, holding her hand.

Martha woke next morning refreshed for continued battle, if battle there had to be. Hushed commotion filled the room. She couldn't understand Henry's making all that stir behind his absurd chair, unless he was angry at last, as he should have been before, at Will Emmons and Gus Michelson. She could understand anger and abet it. The one thing she could neither see nor tolerate was submission to outrageous circumstance. Holding her eyes closed, Martha considered her husband in the light of recent events. Was it possible he was not all she had hoped? Without proper handling would he have knocked under—and cut down?

The two questions were initial charges of an indictment that his wife " then and there " began piling up against Henry Barnet.

She had never knocked under, or cut down. All her life she had worked ahead, frequently only an inch at a time, but always ahead. Born to a do-less, unthrifty home, she

had baked and scrubbed and sewed and studied her way through girlhood towards respectability. From the time she was old enough to order people about, she had dominated her family. And when, finally orphaned, she had led tiny Lettie out to meet Henry Barnet as he rode up with condolences, it was into a decent sitting-room that she invited him.

Thinking of her own indomitable progress, Martha wondered what the sounds in the room portended. Sitting up in bed she saw Henry carrying garments into the adjoining room.

" What in the world? " she exclaimed. " What ever for? "

Lurking behind an armful of shirts, Henry made embarrassed reply.

" I'm—kind of—moving for a while. I mean—with the baby coming—you ought to have a place alone—like a church——"

She laughed, temporarily reassured. Here was a normal condition, normally arrived at, and Henry was getting religious ! Well, let him think she was a saint in a church. In danger, give a man a good stiff religion to toughen his backbone.

CHAPTER II

Henry's backbone didn't toughen, and Martha's world began to crumble. Early in October he ran a partition through the middle of the store and rented the vacated half to a harness-maker. Martha took the ignominious halving of her splendour in mingled rebellion and despair.

" We can move to another town and start over," she tried again and again in the early days of her affliction. " El Stancias isn't the world."

Unfortunately it was the world to Henry.

" I owe money, right here, to men who have trusted me,"

he would answer as monotonously as a child repeating a hard-learned lesson in sleep. " I can't run off and leave them holding the bag."

Martha was no reasoner. She could only feel and that vehemently. Lodged fast in her consciousness was the conviction that men who amounted to anything first willed, and then did. She saw opportunity as an ether, everywhere present, to be grasped and harnessed by a master. Henry's apparent incapacity either for willing or grasping maddened her, and her love for him diminished.

" You don't see what's really at stake," she warned him once. " I'm changing. Thoughts about you boil inside of me, all the time—ugly, dangerous thoughts."

Henry was gifted with insight. He knew then that the time had arrived to come to grips with Martha and conquer her. But he couldn't. He was debilitated by pity and enervated by recollections of obligations which he could not fulfil. Moreover he was actuated by the fatal masculine feeling that women said more than they meant.

" We've got to stay here and plug along," he said doggedly. " Something ought to turn up."

Nothing did turn up. In November Michelson bought the house. Henry stayed late at the store that day and it was dark when he came to his home and handed Martha the duplicate deed.

" So—it's come." She held the document without reading it. " You've let men stronger than you shove and shunt your wife and unborn child out on the street."

" Not quite that bad." Henry tried to be brisk. Some little mercy had come to him from the pitiless day. " Gus and his family are going to Europe for a year, and they want us to stay here till they come back."

" I suppose you think that taking Gus Michelson's charity is saving your wife's home for her ! " Martha lashed out.

" No, I don't." Briskness died under old tendencies toward irascibility. " If you want to know what I think, it's

that I'm damned glad of a chance to rest before I have to go ahead doing more that you don't like. All day long I worry till I think my mind'll crack, and at the end of it I come here to you to be propped up and helped, and what do I get? Hell. Nothing but hell."

"I wish I were a man." Martha's eyes were pale with scorn.

"I wish you were. If you were you'd understand how it is to have the hopes of a lifetime all crashing down together."

"Then for God's sake do something," she whipped at him. "Put what property you still hang on to in my name, and bank the money you got to-day to my credit in Sacramento. I'll find a way—we've a baby coming, and—oh, God in Heaven! what a coward you are!"

Small broken capillaries under the thin skin of Henry's cheeks filled and swelled. But looking at her enlarged body and frantic eyes he controlled his tongue.

"All we have won't meet what we owe," he tried to explain. "I've got to be honest. When Gus paid to-day, Emmons didn't say a word. He knew I'd turn it over. If you were a man, you'd understand it makes small difference what my creditors take, so long as I keep my honour."

"Honour!" Steadied by a table, she laughed, her throat thick with the congestion of her pregnancy. "Honour towards Gus who married his fancy girl! Honour towards Emmons who sneaked to bring you down! But no honour towards your wife and the child she is carrying!"

"Martha!"

"Don't jump. I won't faint. Not until I've told you a few things you need to hear, It's taken a lot to make me see you as you are—but now that I do, I'm through with you. If you have honour so have I. This child is the last you'll ever have by me, Henry Barnet. My love is gone, and I don't give myself without love. I'll live in whatever home you can provide, because there is no other way for a woman. I'll have my baby——"

"It will be my baby too," he reminded her.

"Will it? Why? I'm the one who wanted it from the first. Your part was—being a man in the only way it's left in you to be one. My son is mine, because I've wanted him."

"I want a son, Martha." The capillaries darkened.

"A son? How about me? I've wanted not only a son, but sons. And now I'll never have but one. There'll be no more children by a creature like you, Henry Barnet."

"You're only talking." He went to the window where he had stood on an August evening he could hardly remember, it seemed so long ago. "Women in your condition do. Sometimes they turn on those they love best." Outside were the lawn and the orchard and the blue brave hills. "I wish you hadn't turned on me. We need each other now. When our baby comes——"

"My baby," she said. "Remember that. My baby. My son."

CHAPTER III

Agnes was born in the spring. When the girl child was laid in her arms Martha turned her head on her pillows and wept weakly.

But the warmth of the little head was sweet against her breast. Its sweetness streaked through her flesh and came to her heart. Moving, she felt for a tiny crumpled hand and pressed it against her mouth. Yielding to her baby, she hardened to the husband who had brought her nothing but defeat, and this final, piercing submission to defeat.

Cradling her baby in her arms, Martha saw no hope ahead for either it or her. Henry's downward drift had been constant between August and April. Debts had been met, and with the payment of each something had gone, not only from the shrinking residue of their former affluence, but from Henry himself. He no longer told of meeting

Emmons on the street and jumping into a buggy to try the wind of a new mare among the hills. When he read the intermittent scrawls that came from Gus Michelson, he flushed like an inferior receiving condescension from an officer in the field. He came home hesitantly at night, and left mornings with a kind of plunge, as though, if he went at all, he must go headlong and blindly.

Recalling these things Martha saw that he had failed utterly, and in every department of life. His equality with men was gone. His house had passed to strangers, his commerce with the world was diminished, and now the child he had begotten was a girl.

Hearing steps on the stairs, she signalled the nurse for a handkerchief and dried her eyes.

When he entered Henry looked first at her, but seeing no welcome in her gaze, stooped over the covers laid back by the nurse.

" My ! " he said, and choked. " My—isn't it little ? And a girl, of all things ! I lean towards girls, myself. She'll be pretty, Martha. All the women of your family are. What we better call her, do you think ? "

" Agnes."

" It's a nice name, but who after ? "

" Nobody. I just thought——"

He jerked as though to kiss her, and because of the nurse and doctor she let him touch her cheek.

Encouraged, Henry pulled up the chair behind which he once was wont to dress.

" Aren't you going down-town ? " Martha stirred. She was restless to be alone with her thoughts and her child. " It's late."

" There won't be much trade, and the boy can——"

" Please go ! " She pushed herself high in bed. " And put that chair back. I hate things out of place."

When the door closed, she started what she wanted to say after him. Had he no consideration for her, even now ? Already he had begun to talk of trade. Given

time he would have delivered himself of spleen against the Daylight Store for enlarging its paint department to include glass and oil. His one accelerated faculty lately seemed to be for inveighing against other people's enterprise. Didn't he realise that a woman with a new baby needed cheer around her?

Later in the day, learning the poignant ecstacy of soft gluttonous lips at her bosom, Martha added new hungers to the old ones that had tortured her so long. She was as greedy of Agnes, as Agnes of her. Maternity filled the void left by rejected wifehood. Henry was shut out definitely, and for all time.

Martha was designed for maternity. After a short recess in pain and fatigue, energies flooded back to her, renewed and amplified. When she realised that resolutions against Henry might be difficult to sustain in her increased vigour, she set deliberately to stiffening them.

Fear and insistent dwelling upon her wrongs assisted in the work. Henry must keep to the room he had chosen, and when he looked for the smaller house into which they were to move upon the Michelsons' return, it must be with a separate chamber for himself well in mind. Agnes was there, but no future mishap that would bring another child to failing fortune and a weakling father could be risked. And as far as Martha knew there was but one unfailing preventive for such misfortune.

Tremulously at first, and then with increasing fanaticism as the time approached for the nurse to leave and for her to be alone with her husband, Martha projected a second virginity for herself. When the prospect stretched away inclement and probably insupportable, terror at the all too likely result of its single alternative whipped at her will, and invented an ideal to which she could cling in times of stress, and before which she could immolate herself in the name of piety. It was the ideal of sex suppression in herself, and incidentally in Henry, masked as the virtue of Purity.

When her essentially primitive nature revolted at the

cheat offered to it, terror again insinuated itself and pacified the rebel by the authorised methods for pacification. There was no lack of frightfulness in the threats it flourished. Martha saw herself fecund, prolific, reduced by poverty and fecundity to a mere organism from which proceeded a wan and numerous and hopeless breed. She saw herself drained, broken, and submissive at last, lost to all phases of life save that of production. And dreading Henry as the agent of foreshadowed horrors, she framed a defiant but sanctimonious programme against him.

Platforms, significant or insignificant, are apt to be the more or less ecclesiastical superstructures run up to divert attention from their underlying foundation stones of dread and anger and self interest. Once she saw that she must have a creed to live by, and if necessary to die for, Martha raised such an edifice of new and astounding moralities as to deceive even its builder. Dedicating herself to Purity, spelled with a capital, she rationalised the gentle virtue into an austere abstraction of Puritanism that outdid the Puritans. In the name of expediency, enthroned a Purity, she denied her womanhood and Henry's manhood.

It was not remarkable that in the extremity confronting her, she evoked Purity as a Messiah. The age was one in which all possible revolting interpretations were suggested for sex. Girls were warned to blush if their petticoats blew and revealed an ankle. If they asked why they must blush, horrified hushings were the only answers accorded them. The inference was that males were afflicted with plagues of which, pray God, they must try to remain in ignorance.

At the same time, confusingly enough, spinsterhood was held in no high regard. How one was to avoid being a spinster, and yet remain untouched and uncontaminated by men's propensities, was a perplexing question which Martha's programme seemed to solve.

Henry received news of his permanent banishment in the manner of one receiving a blow standing up. To preserve some remnant of vanity, he resorted to excuses for his wife.

" I suppose," he began, " when a woman has a baby to tend——"

Momentary remorse impelled Martha to allow him such salve as he could find.

" You need sleep nights," she said.

He was grateful for the mercy.

" The place I'm looking at has only three rooms upstairs," he said. " But——"

" Agnes will be in with me," Martha hastened.

Hopes of revived joint interests animated Henry. Aside from saving the piano for Lettie, Martha had refused to participate in plans for weeding out excess furniture, or getting a new house.

" Let's go together and look at the new place," he suggested eagerly. " Lettie can tend the baby for a while."

His tactics were fatal.

" That house is yours," Martha said. " This one was mine until you sold it over my head. I'll stay here until I have to go."

" I had to sell ! " Henry floundered back into the threadbare argument. " My honour——"

" I know about your honour," Martha interrupted. " It doesn't begin at home."

They moved in November. Small rooms, velvet drapes over poor wood-work and carpets cut down to narrow floors, did what was needed to consolidate Martha's stand. Even yet, if Henry had enforced authority, Martha would have surrendered and eventually renewed her regard for him. But he couldn't. He suffered too deeply for her as well as for himself. Afflicted with the malady of perceiving two sides to every case, he could only accept the status thrust upon him with mingled dignity and peevishness.

Physical as well as mental changes occurred in Martha. By the end of the first year in the smaller house her mouth was habitually pursed. Always fluent, her speech took on the continuity of a harangue. She kept Henry at a distance, but her nature was too powerful to be dammed into a

motionless, frozen pool. Bursting the bounds she had set for it, her passion overflowed and tore out new channels of expression. That which had been sex in her became sex antagonism. She was as voluptuous in antagonism as she had once been in love.

Distrusting men, she now saw all men as base. Gus Michelson was a bellowing monster who housed under another woman's roof the mistress he had married. Will Emmons was a poisoned well from which trickled small meannesses. B. J. Winters with his contented wife was a hampered libertine exacting the pleasures of a harem from one acquiescent spouse. The small, bewildered gestures that Henry continued to make were the overtures of lust.

Hating men, she presently came to isolating herself from the world, and snipped the ties that had once bound her to a pleasant community. Permitting Agnes only Stella Winters as a playmate, she devised means for seeing Stella's mother very rarely. The buggy gone she stayed home, relapsing into extravagance only when the practices of penury became so unbearable that she didn't mind battling with Henry over bills.

CHAPTER IV

In the smaller house Agnes grew into a big-eyed, rather leggy four-year-old. She noticed things. For instance she noticed how different her mother's voice was, comforting her in the night, and addressing others in the daytime. It scolded others.

It scolded particularly alarmingly on the day when Lettie should have practised her piano lesson and was late from school instead. The minute Lettie came in Mama went to the window and must have seen something. She must have seen a boy.

"I won't have them trailing you," she said loudly and

suddenly. " They are like filthy little wagging dogs trailing a——"

She didn't say what.

" I couldn't help it." Aunt Lettie began to cry. She was almost that tremendous thing, a young lady, but just the same she began to cry. " They like me—and they're —funny."

" Funny ? " Mama made funny an awful thing to be. " What do you mean by that ? "

Sidling to another room, Agnes listened to see how Lettie would get out of that. There were two things to do. One was to answer, and the other was to practise the piano. Apparently Lettie preferred anything to the piano.

" Nothing," she sniffled. " Only—Walter Morgan——"

" Walter Morgan ! " The voice went still louder. " Have we fallen so low that we run with the Morgan tribe ? Tribe—nothing else—breeding like cotton-tails ! No, I won't tell you who's to blame for that. If you had any modesty you wouldn't ask such a thing. Isn't it enough that I work my fingers to the bone, squeezing out a dollar here and a half-dollar there to give you music lessons so that one day you can teach and be independent of the Walter Morgans of the world ? Isn't it enough that I bake and clean and sew for you ? If I'd had a sister when I was your age to help me, I wouldn't be where I am now. If I'd been taught anything but housework——"

Lettie took to the piano. The hammer of scales mingled with the voice.

One day, when Agnes was seven, she came in from the yard and found her mother packing dishes in the clothes-basket. It was an intoxicating thing to do.

" What ? " she danced on her slender shanks. " Tell me—what ? "

" We're moving again." Mama's lips were straight and grey. " Your father's having to move too—back off the

Square to a side street—where there'll never be anything but neighbourhood trade——"

For all that the speech was too long and said so queerly, Agnes danced even more wildly.

Moving was what lovely next-door trash did. It meant clutters, and places to climb. And now they were moving—not only at home but at the store ! It was better than being next-door trash.

" Ooh ! " she squealed. " Ooh—ooh—ooh ! " Her long brown corkscrews bobbed and swung. Mama did the one thing wanting to make the occasion perfect. Removing a pin from her own beautiful hair, she tucked the corkscrews into a knob.

" Pack your dolls in your play-box," she said, still with queer straight lips.

Instead, Agnes ran to the kitchen and dragged in a mop.

" Let me pack this—in here ! And my clothes——"

The straight lips broke apart. Leaning sideways from the basket, Mama clutched both Agnes and the mop tight against her.

" My baby," she moaned. " All I have—and your father off the Square ! What's to become of us—what's to become——"

Moving wasn't much fun after all.

As a matter of fact it wasn't fun a bit. There seemed to be trouble in the new littler house about where Papa could sleep. Agnes climbed two flights, when nobody knew, to look at the top room which was to be his. She couldn't see why Papa didn't love it. It would have been a ravishing play-house. It was like a tent. There were no walls, only borders where the tented roof came down. One could be an Indian there, like boys, who hung blankets over clothes-lines. You could peek out the one small window and go " bang " at bears.

Going down to explain the possibilities of his room to her father, Agnes found him talking back to her mother.

Talking back was what nobody was allowed to do. Not even Agnes.

" It's an attic," he said. " I won't go to the attic. Agnes is big enough to go in with Lettie now, and it's about time you and I——"

" She's too big to go in with Lettie." Mama was remarkably patient, considering that she was being talked back to. " She notices now. I try to make Lettie careful, but I can't be sure——"

" Now look here, Martha, I'm to be considered too. An attic's no place for——"

" If you could provide a better house, you wouldn't have to take the attic. Carry that book up with you when you go. I won't have Byron lying around for Lettie to see —and Agnes learning to read."

" Now see here ! I pay the rent. If somebody has to take the garret, why can't Lettie ? "

Scolding began.

" When you took me, you took Lettie. You owe her——"

He snatched his book and went.

Another frightening day sounded still different. There was a kind of pounding silence about it, like a deep river running.

Agnes had begun to think of her mother as Martha. She still said the old word when she spoke, but she thought Martha. It went better with the erect black head, and Papa in his attic, and the rest.

Agnes had been playing with children she wasn't allowed to play with. Coming in quietly to wash at the kitchen sink she heard Mrs. Winters in the living-room. There was no parlour now—just a living-room.

She liked Mrs. Winters. It was fun to snuggle against her and feel her laugh. Forgetting to wash she started in, remembered, and sat down on a dining-room chair out of range of both her mother and the visitor.

" I don't believe in miracles," Mrs. Winters said. " But what can you do ? There she is—always a cripple before—

wheeled to the porch and back again, which you remember as well as I do. And now she's walking ! Got a limp, to be sure—but walking ! "

" What did it ? " Agnes could hear quick breath in her mother's question.

" Just one of those new-fangled religions." Mrs. Winters laughed peculiarly, as though she was suddenly scared. " Well, the old one is good enough, and miracle enough for me. Every time B. J. kneels down and gets up again, fat as he is, I see the hand of God."

" What else does it do—besides making cripples walk ? " It was in that question that Agnes first heard the deep river running. Mrs. Winters tried to break it up by laughing again.

" Oh, everything. Good for measles, mumps, lean pocket-book——" She stopped abruptly at the last word and tried to catch it back.

" Now don't take this I'm telling you as Gospel," she hurried. " Leila told me—and you know Leila. She got curious and went to the outlandish church the woman who was a cripple and some others have started in a back room of Native Sons' Hall. Not really a church. No preacher Leila said. Two women stand up in front and read from books."

" What's in the books ? "

" Mercy—I don't know. I've been at my own prayer-book for over thirty years and haven't got the hang of that yet."

" But Lei—she—Mrs. Michelson—— ? "

" Oh, she said there was a Bible, and one gotten up by a woman back east. All women, I guess. Leila said there wasn't a pair of trousers there."

" What did the book by the woman say ? "

" Mercy—I don't know. Leila said it was about making things happen by the Power of the Word. Sounds cracked to me."

" But you've seen the lame woman walk ? "

" Now look here, Martha——"

" She walks." Agnes saw the living-room curtains move as though her mother had risen and was looking out. " What else did she—Lei—Mrs. Michelson say ? "

" She laughed mostly, and said they read a lot about love, and getting rid of the old Adam in us all. Leila said it wouldn't do for her to join up and get rid of the old Adam, because if she did Gus would go off the reservation—and that wouldn't be a miracle, but nature taking its course."

" I suppose I could see that book, and talk to the woman if I went to the room back of Native Sons' Hall ? "

" Now look here, Martha ! " There was the rustle and stir of Mrs. Winters rising. " You leave that religion alone. I only told you to make you laugh, the way Leila and I did."

" Laughing is all right for you and Lei—Mrs. Michelson. I'd laugh too if I were in your shoes. You've both got what you want. You don't either of you ache with wanting things until it's a sickness in your bones, as I do. I had what you have, once—and it slipped away from me. I've got to get it back. Trying hasn't done any good. Hoping for Henry is no use. The more I've hoped and tried for him, the farther he's gone back. If there's anything that can be turned on, like this new electricity that makes machinery run—I've got to get it."

" It's money you're after, Martha. It's money you've always been after. You can't take a religion to get money."

" Why not ? If the crippled woman took it to get her legs, why can't I take it to get out of the hole I'm in ? There's more than one way of being sick, Belle. The Bible tells not only about healing cripples, but about money in fishes' mouths. I don't need health, but I need money."

" Martha—I haven't thought of the devil since preachers used to scare me when I was a little girl. But——"

" What do you suppose the devil's offering for souls nowadays ? " Martha interrupted.

" Don't be a fool," Mrs. Winters snorted. " A wife ought to get her husband's consent before she goes after strange faiths."

" I'm entitled to my spiritual development."

" Spiritual fiddlesticks ! You wouldn't know spirit if you saw it, Martha, any more than the rest of us. What you're after is something you can see and use."

" I'm standing a lot from you, Belle."

" I know, and I'm sorry you have to. But I only told you this to make you laugh, and now you act as though you were going to put on your hat and go right out and pipe it into your house like water works. And you won't use it like water, either—boil out the bad and keep the good. You'll turn the whole shooting match on and let it run, no matter who drowns. That's you. You're so strong. You drive ahead for what you want and think you can get, regardless. If there's religion in this as well as magic, you'll let the religion slide and get the magic. And once you start popping miracles, poor old Henry——"

" Henry is at liberty to pop miracles too. A few miracles wouldn't hurt him."

" But he won't—being Henry. He sticks to what's old and tried. And if this new thing looks like it would work, it will make a new division between you and him. I may as well tell you people are pretty sorry for Henry——"

" You're the only friend I have left," Martha interposed. " I hope——"

" So do I. But I've got to tell you something you don't know, and speak a word for Henry. Men are babies, Martha. If some woman doesn't feed them up by making them think they're the whole world to her, they get rickets of one kind or another. Their conceit starves out, and when their conceit's gone, what have they got left, poor lambs ? "

" I don't want a baby or a poor lamb for a husband," Martha said. " Good-bye, Belle."

" But I had to say it—I had to ! Everybody's talking——"

" Good-bye."

After Mrs. Winters went, Martha saw Agnes.

" Where have you been ? " she asked harshly.

There was no alibi for dirty face and hands.

" They're nice children," Agnes began hotly in defence. " We went into their house and had bread and good jelly."

" That settles it," said Martha. " When it comes to the place that my child plays with trash—I'll take anything."

New books came into the house. One of them didn't interest Agnes, but the Bible was entertaining. It had nice slots along the edge so you could thumb down Samuel or John, or even weensy hiding Jude, without hunting through pages. Mama kept them in her room. At first Papa was mad, and after that he made out like he didn't notice anything at all until Martha wanted to take Agnes to church. Then he said something beginning with " I'll be damned ——," but Martha hushed him and left Agnes at home.

She did go once however, in the middle of a week, when her mother wanted to ask questions of the woman who had been lame.

The woman was tiny, and leaned sideways, and cocked an odd small head like a fairy who had grown old listening for what she could never quite hear. Her hands were hardly bigger than birds' feet.

" There's so much about—love—in this." Martha touched a book on a table and dropped her voice when she said love as though Agnes mustn't hear. " I'm just a beginner, and I don't know what is meant by—love."

" Why," the little woman cocked her head brightly. " Love is God and God is Love."

" I know all about that," Martha said impatiently. " I only wondered about—the other kind."

She looked at Agnes and then at the small woman as though telling her to use big words in answering because of a child listening.

It wasn't necessary. The small woman was as frightened at what Martha asked, as Martha was at asking. Her face got to be a shimmer of red, and her small hands moved and moved.

" Read your books," she stammered, " and you'll see.

There's a whole chapter—if children are an object—but when we glimpse true spiritual creation and leave animality behind——"

"Thanks," said Martha. "It was what I wanted to know."

Agnes was eleven when Aunt Lettie ran away with Walter Morgan. Dinner time was at six o'clock then, instead of noon, and when Aunt Lettie wasn't home from her music teacher's house at half-past six, Papa went to fetch her.

He came back to say that Lettie wasn't to be found.

Agnes stayed up late that night. Martha forgot to send her to bed. At eleven the station agent stopped on his way home, and delivered a telegram. It was from Sacramento and said Lettie and Walter were married and on their way to San Francisco.

Next day Agnes came from school to find Aunt Lettie's room all changed around.

"This can be yours until your Aunt Lettie comes back," her mother told her.

"I want Aunt Lettie to come back." Agnes broke into tears at a new desolation in the house.

"She'll come," her mother said. "She'll come when she has suffered enough."

"I don't want Aunt Lettie to suffer," Agnes wailed. "And I don't like this room. I want to be with you."

"I need my mornings to myself to read and study and do my mental work." Martha was storing starched white garments in emptied bureau drawers. "Your father can look after your breakfast and get you off to school. I've got to have time. If your Aunt Lettie had had all a girl needs to make her home happy—and now with you coming on——"

She bent farther over a short, crackling petticoat.

"Go down and practise," she said. "I've got to be alone."

CHAPTER V

The most beautiful day she could remember came just a week before Agnes graduated into High School. She was thirteen and a little over. Stella was fourteen, and in the same class because she'd been to the World's Fair with her mother once, and had stayed home very frequently during the past two terms. Agnes was reconciled to these absences because they kept Stella back with her.

She loved Stella with the hot, tight intensity of a lonely henchman for a capricious but captivating lord. Stella could inflict suffering, and often did. But this day she was kind, though her kindness took the form of queer, vaguely alarming interrogations.

Owing to showers in the morning, Martha had packed a lunch in a box. Usually Agnes had just time to reach home at noon, eat, practise fifteen minutes, and return as the bell rang. But to-day she had her lunch, and when the sky cleared during the last class before dismissal Stella made signs indicating that the two of them should go alone and eat back of a depleted wood-pile in the school yard.

"I shouldn't have come to-day," Stella said as they settled in their retreat. "You know how bad it is to get your feet wet, don't you?"

The seemingly meaningless query did something to Agnes. It made her feel weird inside, as though she stood on the edge of a cliff and might walk off at any moment.

"I wore rubbers," she said.

Stella took a large green pickle from her box and bit into it with small relishing teeth.

"Stanley Wade giggled when I came back to-day," she said and swallowed a bite. "Do you think boys know?"

Know what? Know what? Agnes wanted to cry. Instead she retreated from the mystery that boys might know and she did not.

"I don't bother with boys," she said. "Let's trade lunches."

Reserving the pickle, Stella traded. Mrs. Barnet was a good cook, and the Winters' hired girl wasn't. Congratulating herself on two stuffed halves of eggs in the top of Agnes' box, she resumed her occult discussion.

"Nothing makes the least difference to Maggie Doyle," she said. "If it's Saturday, she goes right ahead and helps her mother scrub. Do you suppose that's because she's Irish?"

Speculation regarding Maggie Doyle was not permitted to Agnes. Except for admonitions, Martha denied the existence of all Doyles. Old Man Doyle was father to a clan that came nearer living baronially, in point of acres than any other in El Stancias, and occupied a house consisting of a ramshackle nucleus around which sheds multiplied in the manner of fungus.

They were squatters who had taken possession of one of those untitled tracts that litigation leaves in every community. Profiting by other people's quarrels Old Man Doyle had assumed sovereignty over as pretty a spread of wood-lot and pasture land as the whole northern mountain country of California afforded. Living where he had so long, contenders for the property feared to oust him, lest the courts, with attention finally called to his years of tenure, should award him his home by right of continued occupancy.

But the people of El Stancias were not as non-observant as the courts. Periodically they protested among themselves at the menace to youth constituted by Doyle's shaded grottoes and cow-paths. It was suspected that almost anything could happen there and not infrequently did. Hard pressed for analogies, ministers compared it with those groves in the Bible upon which wrath had descended, generally too late. They could do this, since the Doyles, both socially and religiously, were outcasts in the militantly Protestant town. Doyle's lot was forbidden to Agnes, and prohibitions had recently been emphasised since when she went to High School the shortest route would be a winding trail through pastures and woods.

Recalling certain of her mother's recent references to Doyle's lot, Agnes answered Stella's question evasively.

" The Irish are funny," she said, and then, in a flash of inspiration, " my dress is nearly finished."

Stella's black, bird-like eyes came up.

" What's it made of ? "

" Persian lawn."

" White ? "

" Of course. All graduation dresses are white."

" Fine ? "

" Seventy-five cents a yard."

Stella returned complacently to the stuffed eggs. Her own dress had cost a dollar and half a yard.

" I've finished." She handed back Agnes' box. " Let's go find some of the other girls."

Agnes wanted to stay where she was, alone with Stella. But if Stella said to go, go she must. The idea of other girls, lots of girls, had attraction too. She wasn't allowed much leeway in the matter of companions. Her long limbs ached for romps and chases, and the wild whirls of being caught. Racing after Stella, she was surprised at the volume of the shouts that stretched her throat. An unorganised, ruleless game began in the school yard. It consisted of taggings, runnings, and slidings down a terrace to the street. Agnes scrambled with the others and was deliciously flushed and moist when the bell rang and lines formed to march to the rooms.

Nor was that all, nor even a half of the day. A teachers' meeting developing, classes were adjourned at three o'clock. There was a whole hour free before Agnes had to be home. Out of school and out of ear-shot of possible listeners, Stella was quick with plans.

" Let's go down-town and walk around," she said.

The suggestion was so alluring to Agnes that it hurt.

" But I can't——" she stammered. " I——"

" Scare cat," Stella challenged. " I can't go down-town either, but I do. A girl's got a right to——"

She didn't say what a girl had a right to. Instead she listened to thunder and wild halloo behind.

"Don't look," Stella whispered and lowered her eyes. "It's that Michelson boy. High is always out at three, and he's heard about us and is looking for me."

Thunder and shouts increased, and Eddie Michelson volleyed past on his pony.

"Wild Klickitat of the plains!" he yelled. Swooping, he grabbed a long tuft of grass, rode ahead, circled and returned, brandishing the earthy roots like a scalp. A lumbering dog galloped after him, and stood with worshipping eyes when Eddie drew rein.

Eddie was so funny that Agnes laughed until she could feel her hair tightening in curls at neck and temples, as it always did when she got warm.

"Stop it!" Eddie made his face as terrible as a painted Indian. "Wigwam—bite the lady." He snapped his fingers at the motionless dog. "Bite all ladies that don't know their manners."

"Is Wi-i-gwam its name?" Agnes managed to get out.

"Certainly it's name is Wigwam. Hi you—Wigwam!" Eddie yelped again and held a hand out straight. "Up and over." The dog backed sedately, gathered and leaped. Agnes laughed again.

"First wigwam I ever saw jump," she gasped. "Why—why do you call it Wigwam?"

"Joke of my mother's," Eddie spoke down from his horse. "Once she heard a preacher say that the tents of Israel would people the earth some day, and she said old Snoozleums ought to be called Tents—on account of the pups. I thought up Wigwam for short."

Stella, who had paced demurely, apparently detached from the uproar, stopped and stared censoriously.

"Eddie Michelson," she said, "you get right out of here. If you can't be a gentleman——"

"It's Wigwam can't be a gentleman," Eddie interrupted. "She would if she could. Wouldn't you, old

lady ? " He got down from his horse and with the bridle over his arm stooped, crumpling the loose skin of the hound's great head in a rough caress. " Yep," he said when he rose. " She says she would if she could. It would be lots less trouble."

The three walked on. Suppressed titters were impacting behind Stella's prim lips. Agnes wanted to ask if Wigwam had any puppies at home now, but Stella had made it clear that lady dogs weren't to be discussed.

Eddie edged close to Agnes. When he moved as though he might tuck his free arm under hers, Stella stopped holding her lips tight and danced ahead to pat the pony's nose. The little procession stopped.

" Does he stamp at you and paw ? " Stella patted first and then drew her hand back.

" Not if you don't stamp and paw first," came morosely from Eddie. Agnes wanted to laugh again. Of all the funny boys !

" Listen ! " Stella squealed with a daring idea. " Can't I sit sideways on that saddle and ride around ! "

" Go ahead." Eddie flung her the reins.

" But you've got to lead him. I'd be afraid. I wouldn't dare."

" You forget pretty good," Eddie said. " It's about a year ago I saw you riding anything you could lasso."

Stella was unabashed. She was holding Eddie's attention and meant to go on holding it.

" I wear longer skirts now." She looked down modestly. " Horses shy at long skirts."

" Yank 'em up then," said Eddie. " You can't interest me. I've seen your legs before."

" Eddie Michelson ! " Stella combined rebuke with a giggle. " You're the awfullest——"

Eddie retrieved the reins with decision.

" How about a soda ? " he asked, a trifle explosively under the pressure of a magnificent idea. " All three of us go down and have a soda."

" Agnes can't." Stella smiled. " Agnes is afraid. But I——"

" All right then—no soda." said Eddie.

They moved on. It was a heavenly day, hot—but heavenly. When they came to a street with a grade-cut at the side, Eddie tied his horse to a stump, and they all sat down, Wigwam panting before them.

Spent with laughter, Agnes relaxed to the cool grass under her. There were trees across the way that cast shadows like marks made with a broad pencil. The horse champed. You could smell the rank smell of the grass as he chopped it up in his mouth. Wigwam snapped at a fly. Her jaws went " chomp," but the fly got away. There were little blue flowers that winked and went out, like dolls' eyes closing, as the horse ate them up. A floppy yellow poppy followed the blue flowers. Poppies had smell all their own—like mint and stable-yard mixed. Eddie sat hunched forward, looking a long ways off towards the hills that seemed to skip under the hot sun.

" This is pretty country," he said at length. " I shouldn't wonder if it was the prettiest anywheres. We've been all around and we like this best."

Then, to cover his lapse into sentiment, Eddie shot up, untied his horse, and did some more tricks. They were the funniest yet. Agnes had to lean against a tree, she laughed so hard.

When pencil mark shadows of trees across the way drew out long enough to touch her, Agnes remembered she must go.

" I've got to be home at ten past four." Getting up, she pushed at her damp hair. Eddie dismounted. He had a watch. It was a silver watch with a yellow gold locomotive and green gold smoke inlaid on the case.

" We'll start pretty quick then," he said. " I'll go along."

" You can't ! " It was terrible having him even suggest it. Once Walter Morgan had walked home with Lettie, and

after that she'd run away and broken Mama's heart. "You can't—I've got an errand——"

"Errand your Grandmother," Eddie said as though he knew about Aunt Lettie. "But next year in high, when you're your own boss——"

"I'm my own boss now——" she began miserably.

"Ride some more," Stella commanded impatiently. "Be funny."

Eddie neither rode nor was funny.

"I'll tell you when to start," he said to Agnes, and sitting on the bank above the sidewalk, he hunched his shoulders again and tucked his head in between them. Now and then he spoke to Wigwam. Approximately once a minute he took out the watch with the gold locomotive and streaming gold smoke. Agnes rested against the tree, curiously undisturbed about the time. Her confidence reposed in Eddie. At the end of a final contemplation of the watch, he shot up and hauled her to her feet.

"'Bye," he said. "Scoot. I fudged two minutes."

"She ran easily, long-leggedly, thick braids thumping her back. The hot air of afternoon was balm in her lungs. Nearing home she reduced her pace and mopped her face with a wadded handkerchief. Her mother never knew that school was out at three that day.

CHAPTER VI

It was early next term after Agnes went into High, that she woke up one morning with the wonderful feeling that just to be alive was utterly good. Her limbs lay long and strong and at perfect rest under the covers. No apprehensions that lessons would be hard, or practice tedious, or her mother difficult hovered over her. Everything was easy and perfectly good.

It occurred to her that that was the way God must

have felt when He yawned and stretched on creation morning and said, " Well—so this is the beginning, is it ? I wonder how a world would be, and a moon and a sun, and some good-looking stars scattered around ? "

Agnes had given considerable thought to the puzzle of God. Her mother insisted God was both Father and Mother. One could imagine a Mother who worked hard and talked hard and owned one completely. Or one could conceive of a Father who didn't quite fill the requirements, but was nevertheless nice. It was combining the two that made for confusion. You couldn't get a picture, or even a pronoun to fit. IT wouldn't do. ITSELF was better ; and so until a likelier term was found, she used ITSELF.

Awakening now, she was conscious of ITSELF—not far off, nor even circulating around outside like the air, but within, self contained—deep as a well within.

Pushing her arms and legs towards fresh, cool places between the sheets, Agnes thought she probably felt like God—not God's child, nor image and likeness, nor even God's window-pane—but God ITSELF.

The window-pane theory was Martha's. It meant that the Light shone through you, doing as it pleased without any resistance on your part. That what it pleased was generally what Martha also desired only went to prove that Mama was always right.

Agnes had grown so accustomed to being an insubstantial medium for another entity to act upon, that now when she came upon this new, self-contained idea, she was at first startled, and then diverted. From her narrow bed she watched the sparkles of early morning skitter around the edges of a window-blind with a sense of having lighted the dawn herself. The light racketed in spanking little jumps here and there. Flashing across the handkerchief box on the bureau it made luminous jewellery of the painted blobs on the pin-tray. Concentrating on a passe-partouted picture on the wall, it lit splintery, devotional fire before the face of James K. Hackett as Rudolph Rassendyl.

The picture was chief among the treasures of the room. Finding Agnes surreptitiously tearing it from a magazine one night, her father brought a square of glass from the store next day, and when Mama was at church on Sunday the two of them spent a cramped, ecstatic hour on the floor with a roll of gummed tape. Supported by each other they hung it and faced Martha with an accomplished fact when she returned. Remarkably enough, nothing but disapproving silence resulted from the daring deed. Mr. Hackett remained on the wall. And now as Agnes lay enjoying the gay, unlikely spin of new sensations within her, her eyes rested on him in the very fulfilment of joy.

His was not the only picture Agnes owned. Directly over her bed was the framed photograph of a lady wearing a slantwise cross in some lace under a high, thin chin. The lady had crimped hair, and beautiful kind eyes in cavernous sockets. Agnes didn't dislike her. She entertained the same awe for her that another little girl might have felt for a crucifix or a saint. It was just that she took the fun out of things, and so whenever she could, Agnes looked at Mr. Hackett instead.

The photograph was an instance of the window-pane thing. Her mother had been eloquent when she bestowed it and put it up where her child's eyes might close on it at night and open on it in the morning—providing she slept on her right side.

Agnes took to sleeping on her left side. Admitting all the photograph represented, Agnes wished it out of her room. Even if Mrs. Winters no longer came to the house, Stella did—and she always peeked sideways at the picture and then away as though it were not quite decent.

Once when Agnes spoke up, Martha was firm in a hurt way. She asked what Principle could be expected to do, if one did nothing for Principle? After this when she had an ear-ache, did she want a doctor, or did she want Principle applied? Agnes wanted Principle. She was

nearly as afraid of doctors as she was of Catholics. It seemed you had to bargain with Principle.

But this morning she was weighed down by neither Principle nor the lady. Strength and freedom played gently through her—and that was strange because for two days a heavy bumping headache had pulled at all she said or did. Remembering the headache she got up to be sure it was gone.

And she saw a terrible thing. She saw that she was going to die.

Morbid fragments caught at school and at the grocery where women stood in groups wagging their heads and sighing, flew together in her mind. Galloping consumption ! Spots on handkerchiefs ! Death !

With a child's instant recoil towards its mother, she called. Martha was deep in her books in her own bed, and didn't hear. Shuddering at the lurid warnings of extinction, Agnes flew to the only refuge that she knew.

Martha sat up from the two pillows against which she reclined, removed the hand with which she had been covering her eyes and turned silent inquiry upon the intruder.

" What is it ? " she asked when Agnes didn't speak.

Agnes clutched her little girl's night-dress across her little girl's chest. Stark terror stared from her face. Martha caught a quick breath, and pushing away some books propped on her knees threw back the covers and made room beside her. Agnes dived in, face down.

" What's the matter ? " Martha's voice and arm were equally strong.

" Oh——" Agnes shivered. " Oh—— ! "

" H'm'm," said Martha.

She repeated the " H'm'm," as she thought. It had come then. Distaste for what had come wrote itself in intensified colour on her handsome face.

" Tell me," she said, and braced herself to hear. " Tell me what has happened."

"Oh——!" Only the semblance of words came from the pillow. Fear was giving way to something worse than fear in Agnes. Something undefined, but worse than fear. "When I got up—Oh—Oh—Oh!"

Martha tightened her arm around the shuddering child, put her head down close to the hidden face and asked a question. Agnes' body contracted in horror, and her buried head moved in assent.

Martha returned to thought. Seldom in a very vocal life had she found it difficult to talk. But this that confronted her was difficult. Much must be said, and yet nothing divulged. She made three efforts at speech, and halted each time because the line on which she had started led directly to facts, and facts were to be avoided.

"There are evils in life," she began, and having found a dramatic opening speech, proceeded. "There are evils in life which, on this plane, we seem to have to accept. My baby is casting off her swaddling clothes." Babies had not been swaddled, even when Agnes was one, but Martha spoke well in metaphors. "She is coming into the haze of errors called human experience. What has happened now is part and parcel of the mist which went up and watered the whole face of the ground when Adam——"

Adam not being a proper person to introduce in the situation, Martha stopped and started again.

"I can't explain to you, and you wouldn't want me to if I could. Eve was cursed——"

Floundering into the bogs of Genesis again, she retreated to less anthropological and vastly less illuminating ground.

"The main thing is to accept what has happened as an error that we have to suffer to be so now, and not to talk about it, or think about it, or ask questions or answer any."

Agnes writhed in aversion for herself. Martha's hand stroking the tumbled brown hair was strong and rhythmical.

"It would be better, I think," she went on, "if my

little daughter saw less of Stella Winters from now on. Stella is older, and has been raised less carefully, and there is no telling what she may have picked up. She always has boys around her. You wouldn't like it, would you, if a boy should overhear Stella, or pick up a note she had written to another girl, about you ? "

The cold phantom of death had been kinder than the conflagration that licked Agnes now. Something abominable—something she was powerless to avert, but which was yet abominable—had fastened upon her and cut her away from the world and Stella who was the world. She was an island of shame, isolated by an unexplained plague passed on to her by an equally obscure sin of Eve. She was so smirched and soiled that even her mother could speak of her blemish only in threats and warnings. And Stella—Stella——

Shrinking from the warm flesh that pressed her, the girl lay rigid along the border of the bed.

Satisfied with her masterly handling of a difficult job, Martha rose, thrust her feet into crocheted bedroom slippers and proceeded vigorously from chiffonier to bureau, discoursing the while. Having dealt with unpleasant physical manifestations, she entered a field of abstractions and was voluble on the subjects of Error and Truth, Mortal and Immortal. To batter at the concrete with the nebulous had become her favourite diversion.

Presently Agnes began to listen. She couldn't tell what it was all about, but the familiar wash of words soothed her. Confidence in Martha, the strong, handsome woman so eminently designed to inspire confidence, returned. Cut off from everything else, Agnes knew she still had her mother. The wound of losing Stella throbbed and bled. It would always throb and bleed. But the wash of words went on, and no matter how little it seemed to mean, there was healing in its tide.

Laved by the ceaseless run of sound, trouble lifted a little from Agnes, and contrition took its place. Contrition

reached giant proportions when Martha said there need be no school that day. Stricken with remorse at remembering how often she had been guilty of retiring into closets and behind doors, to stop her ears with her fingers when her mother started talking and forgot to stop as she was doing now, Agnes hung upon the words and words that rolled through the room, and was grateful for them. They were a thickening veil that gradually clouded her horror of herself.

Persistent human trends towards resignation asserted themselves. When Martha completed her ministrations, the girl returned to her own room. Rudolph Rassendyl greeted her with a covert smile, and she took the picture down and put it on a shelf in the closet. A fog had risen or a cloud fallen, and sunshine no longer made jewellery on the pin-tray nor danced on the handkerchief box. For a brief time that morning she had lighted the dawn herself, then twilight came and saddened the sun. Raising the blind she looked out. Terror was gone and shame could be hidden. She was not happy, neither was she in despair. But the feeling of being God ITSELF was gone.

CHAPTER VII

At school Stella hinted. Filled with guilty knowledge of herself Agnes retreated, and the break required by Martha occurred.

Stella was partly piqued and partly relieved. Maggie Doyle was a more thrilling companion.

An alliance between Maggie and Stella left Agnes in a void which other girls had no wish to fill. Agnes didn't care. If she couldn't have Stella, she wanted no one at all.

She still loved Stella hotly and jealously. She died daily deaths as Stella and Maggie, merged by locked arms and touching heads, made giggling promenades of the school

yard. Agnes couldn't avoid seeing, as she carried her lunch regularly now because there was only a half-hour intermission at High. Stella and Maggie paired off to go home too. Following alone at a distance, and turning into the graded street she was enjoined to follow, Agnes would see them plunge into the leafy mysteries of Doyle's lot. Stella would hold back an alder sapling at the entrance to the path. When she let it go, it would sway and move like cool green fire closing behind her.

Sometimes before the two entered the lot, they would glance back, then dive forward hilariously, and Agnes would become a moist, wavering pillar of self-consciousness.

Once Stella and Maggie quarrelled. That afternoon Maggie entered the cow-path alone, and Stella waited on the graded street. Agnes slowed her pace to a crawl, but it did no good. Kicking at pebbles and utilising cracks in the plank sidewalk as markings for hop-scotch, Stella tarried.

Agnes' joints refused to co-ordinate. The books carried by a strap bumped and bent her knees ridiculously. Stella saw. She always saw when Agnes was clumsy.

"Hello," she said as the other came up and almost passed. "Wait, can't you?" Kicking a pebble adroitly into the gutter she went for the hat laid tidily on the grass.

Agnes waited. Her hunger for Stella was so great she could do nothing else.

"Mag's got her Irish up," Hatted, neat, unperturbed, Stella hooked her arm in Agnes'. "I'll tell you what let's do. Let's go through the lot and show her I don't care."

It was neither a flattering invitation nor one she ought to accept, but surging desire bowed Agnes into an involuntary duck of submission. The books bumped again, and again Stella saw.

"Come on, funny," she said.

Agnes went, infusions of old felicities limbering her feet. She was with Stella again.

Holding aside the sapling, Stella made a door into the lot. Beyond the sapling they walked single file. Even Stella was embarrassed for a while and didn't speak. A wagon rattled and passed along the street behind. There were hazels and small oaks and pines bordering the path. Moss grew under the oaks. Stella must have picked up a seed pod, for Agnes heard it crack as she broke it.

Recovering composure quickly, Stella insinuated herself between the other girl and the greenery at the side of the path. Agnes could think of nothing to say. When they came to a wide mossy place, Stella sat down.

" Maggie's the worst," she said, looking up. " She's awful."

Echoes of warnings came to Agnes. Alarmed and incapable of thought she did the least tactful thing possible.

" I'm not allowed to have anything to do with Maggie Doyle," she said. " The Doyles are trash."

Punishment came swiftly. Breaking another seed pod Stella spoke down at the dry husks in her hands.

" Mag thinks worse things than trash about you," she said. " She says everybody laughs about your father because your mother has made what her church calls a demonstration out of him."

Stung by unintelligible implications in Maggie's taunt, Agnes flung about her blindly.

" Maggie Doyle'd better leave my father alone," she panted. " Hear ? And you too. If my father got drunk like Maggie's——"

Throat knotted and eyes blurred, she could get no further. Stella observed the disorganisation she had brought about and decided to be nice.

" I told her her old man got drunk," she said, and patted a place beside her on the moss. " Come on, sit down and let's talk about Maggie."

Yielding, Agnes looked at the sky, but sat down.

" I ought to go," she said.

" She got mad as anything when I said her old man

got drunk," Stella tittered. " You ought to see her mad. Irish ? My hat ! I liked it and made her madder. I said my father was going to get Mr. Barnet in the Citizen's Association—and he'd never do that for any old Doyle."

Knots in Agnes' throat untied. But she was restless at the passing of time.

" I've got to go home," she said, pulling herself and her books up. Stella rose too, brushing seed pods from her skirt.

" I'll go along," she said. " Maybe, if you tell your mother to ask me, I can stay all night."

The suggestion deprived Agnes even of frenzied speech. Hot, watery weakness attacked her.

" Wouldn't your mother ask me ? " Stella inquired in a small, sharp voice.

" She doesn't—she said I mustn't——"

Lashing out for something to say Agnes made a fatal start, saw it as fatal, and fled, books bumping, knees bending.

At the end of the cow-path she dived back, inviting any disaster at home rather than to leave Stella with that terrible start unretracted.

Humming a little, Stella stepped around her like a sleek, self-confident bird. Agnes trailed, voiceless and choking. At the end of the path Stella mounted to the sidewalk, swung her skirts daintily and took the direction home.

" Stella—wait—— ! " Agnes pelted after her and grabbed her sleeve. " Don't be mad ! I don't know what I'll do if you're mad ! "

Stella freed her sleeve and patted fastidiously at the wrinkles made by Agnes' clutching fingers.

" Who's mad ? " she asked. " Nobody said anything, did they ? Nobody that counts, I mean."

Agnes stood while the distance between them stretched. She didn't count with Stella. That was it. She never had counted with Stella and never would. Life was empty. It had filled for a moment and now it was empty again. Her eyes overflowed, and then grew so hot they dried her tears. She went home.

From the upstairs room where she sat at her sewing machine, Martha heard the front door swing.

"That you, Agnes?" she called.

"Yes."

"Were you kept in?"

"No."

"Then where have you been? It's late."

"Nowhere."

"What?"

"Nowhere."

"Don't nowhere me. I know how long it takes to walk from school. I'm not like some mothers. I know——"

She was launched again. Forgetting to set Agnes to her practising, she let her clear voice fill the house.

Putting her books down noiselessly, Agnes tiptoed from the hall to the living-room and put her fingers in her ears. Twice she removed them experimentally. When the bell-like voice still impacted on her drums she went gingerly to the kitchen, pushed the door closed with one foot, and let her hands fall. Dropping into a chair, she rested her head against the grey painted wainscoting. She didn't cry. She couldn't cry if she tried. There was a pulsing, terrified place under her belt. Stella was gone. She would never come back.

The sewing machine was going again upstairs. Its low, industrious rumble was like a hive of bees. Stella was gone. She didn't count with Stella, never had, and never would.

There was a clock in the kitchen. It ticked its hands around by jerks. When they straddled the dial to five o'clock Agnes went to the porch and got some potatoes from a box. Dinner had better be started. Upstairs the sewing machine buzzed busily on.

CHAPTER VIII

Martha was not the only member of the Barnet household to do mental work of a morning. Henry had a few affirmations and denials of his own to make. But whereas Martha worked silently, Henry muttered.

It wasn't that he resented lighting the fire and getting in wood for the day. That was a man's job, and he proposed to perform it. But making the mush and boiling the coffee was woman's work, and it galled him to do it. He harboured a fantastic prejudice against getting breakfast. The knowledge that somebody else read in bed while he stirred lumps out of the oat-meal, stuck in his craw.

Henry had changed since the days when he thought women were tender creatures, requiring morning naps and night-shirts spread over their feet. He knew now that women were the indomitable and men the helpless sex. It had been bad enough before Martha found a religion to back her up in thinking she was Godamighty's pet. Those books in bed made Henry mad.

He liked to read in bed too, at night. He liked to stretch out when the long day at the store was over, and rest his feet, and read Pope and Byron and other majestic exponents of the English tongue. But he couldn't do it. He got so dog-tired being his own clerk and book-keeper and janitor in the store on the side street that sleepiness overtook him the minute he touched bed. Besides that, he hated his room. Do what he could it remained an attic, resisting all his irritable man's efforts to make it anything else.

Chair, bed, table, book-shelf, everything he possessed stood bleakly away from where it ought to stand. Nothing taller than a pair of shoes could possibly be set against the foot and a half of wall allowed by the sloping roof. Even his other suit flapped in space back of the faded portière that had been put up to make him think he had a closet.

Henry didn't know, but Agnes suffered about the room too. Viewed from the stand-point of her mother's

argument that Henry was a misanthropic hermit who liked to be alone, it should not have troubled her. But it did.

Every now and then when she wasn't observed and stole up to put it to rights, she wanted to cry about the room. Little futile efforts at convenience, and even beauty, were all around. Henry had brought home some new, extensively advertised paint, and experimented on his chair. Martha's comments on untried brands of goods were justified by the results of his work. Everything that touched it stuck to the chair.

Dangling above the bed was a baby picture of Agnes. Two snapshots taken when she graduated from the grades, and a lithograph of " Lincoln the Emancipator " were tacked to the slope beside the dresser.

On the dresser was the alarm clock by which Henry rose in time to get breakfast, and beside it the first fruit of Agnes' needle, in the form of a pin-cushion. The embroidered top was a congestion of coloured silk lumps, but Henry held it supreme among pin-cushion tops because she had made it. Stuck into interstices of the embroidery, and always returned to the holes already made, were the tie-pin he wore Sundays and the safety pins which held his night-shirt close to his neck on cold nights. Prodigal of time when it came to manufacturing sightly things for Agnes, Martha had long since had it revealed to her that keeping buttons on night-shirts occupied minutes which might better be devoted to higher interests, such as studying her books. Since one had to sacrifice something to gain time, Martha sacrificed Henry's night-shirt buttons.

Agnes grieved over the surface of the dresser, but the top drawer was harder yet to bear. In it, along with a collection of handkerchiefs, a worthless pants-hanger, and innumerable wooden collar-buttons sent home in shirts by the Chinamen, were three nicely folded neckties and a bottle of benzine to sponge them off. Those were bad enough. But the worst article of all was a box, comically

decorated with a picture of a man surmounting the chief difficulty of bachelor life. It held rivets and metal buttons, and printed directions for clamping the two together in garments from which the original fastenings had been torn.

Agnes couldn't stand the bachelor buttons. Sometimes when her mother was out, she climbed to the attic and worked hurriedly and bunglingly with thread and needle. The next morning her father would look at her and smile, and she would smile back. Even at breakfast together they made a secret of what had gone on.

The assumption was that Agnes belonged to her mother by right of birth pains and unremitting care. Both pains and care were incontrovertible. Agnes was there, and Martha laboured without ceasing to present her properly adorned to the world. She made clothes from next to nothing. Agnes was as well dressed as Stella Winters. She rivalled girls whose fathers were not failures.

That was the pitiful, inexorable thing that made the room and the safety pins and the sticky chair and the bachelor buttons hurt so intolerably when Agnes saw them. They were the appurtenances of failure. Her father had failed.

Pierced by this knowledge Agnes did all she safely could to blunt the sting of it in him. Whenever anyone spoke nicely of him she carried the news. If the groceryman said "How's your pa?" she reported the question as promptly as circumstances could permit. She made it a practice to come down with a show of elation to the breakfast he had cooked, and to draw her chair eagerly to the kitchen table.

"You make the best oatmeal," she would enthuse.

Henry had nice eyes, brown and straight. They would squint with pleasure at that. He loved compliments.

"Have some more." The offer would follow regularly. "It's good for you. People ought to eat more cereal. Cereal for breakfast and ever so often parsnips for dinner."

He was a great contender for parsnips. Martha always pursed her lips inelastically when he got started on parsnips, affirming that the only reason some folks wouldn't have them was because they had high-toned notions.

" Cereal and parsnips make bone and muscle," he would resume. " You're not filling out like you should. You're tall, but you don't put on weight, and you get tired. Girls ought to round out. You should have seen your mother." He still harked back to Arcady now and then. " The rosiest girl in the county. What you need is bone and muscle. Look at me. I never feel the walk down-town, because I eat the right kind of breakfast."

Agnes didn't like oatmeal, but she would take a second dish.

On the morning after the tragedy in Doyle's lot, Agnes found it hard going. To cover the fact that she couldn't down even her first dish of mush, she cast about for something to say that would divert her father's attention from her lack of appetite, and recalled the only crumb of comfort that had come to her from the disaster of the day before.

" Stella——" She began as bravely as she could, but the name meant so much it was hard to say. " Stella—she walked home part way with me yesterday—and she said her father wanted you to go into the Citizen's Association."

The little veins under Henry's cheeks brightened slowly. He added a drop more coffee to the dregs of sugar in his cup and cleared his throat.

" Well," he said after a while, " I guess I ought to be in. I kind of belong. A long time ago I—in a way—proposed the idea of an Association. Gus and B. J. were in the store—while it was on the Square—gassing. I said it looked to me like we reputable merchants ought to get together and form a lodge or something. It's been a good many years since then—B. J. and Gus have both got rich—but I guess I belong with them."

Through all her misery Agnes felt a little bounce of happiness. Her father wasn't pitiful and an outcast when he talked of the men he knew. He belonged with Mr. Michelson and Mr. Winters among the reputable merchants of the town. With her pain alleviated a little, she got up and carried dishes to the sink.

" I'll leave the coffee on the back of the stove for Mama," she said.

" We left more than usual of cream." Henry looked into a blue jug.

" How's—how's business ? " Agnes asked through a splash of hot water.

" It'll pick up when spring comes and folks smarten their houses up."

" I'm glad of that."

" So am I."

Henry's habit was to leave as soon as breakfast was over. This morning he delayed. Some quality in the atmosphere of the kitchen held him. Putting more wood in the stove, he straightened his chair and rolled the towel on the pantry door until the face it presented was fresh.

" Won't you be late ? " Agnes asked.

" I kind of thought I'd take the street-car down for a change," he said. " Haven't ridden as much as I should since they put it in."

" I'm coming down to the store some day and visit you," Agnes said daringly.

" That'll be fine." Henry stood against the casing of the pantry door. If he'd had a cigar he would have smoked.

" I'd have been there before," Agnes went on, " only I have to come home and practise."

" Yes, I know. Well, you come when you can. It won't be long till Christmas, and I thought I'd fix up the window special for that. And maybe later on for Valentine's day."

She wanted to ask, but didn't, how a paint and glass window could be fixed up for Valentine's day.

" I'll come and look at it both times," she said instead.

" You might—maybe your mother—I don't recollect that she's ever been to the store since I moved. Maybe——"

" I know she'll come if she isn't too busy," Agnes lied. " You'd better go now." She looked at the clock. " It's most time for the car to pass the corner."

" Yep." He straightened away from the casing. " Hate to go. It's cozy here."

She followed him to the hall and even helped him with his coat and hat. He looked nice, starting out for his store. No matter how old his clothes were, he kept them neat, and looked nice. Courageously she stepped to the porch after him, and holding the door partly closed behind her, watched him go. He looked nice. No matter if his store was a little one, men like Mr. Michelson and Mr. Winters wanted him with them in their Association. All at once she was proud of her father. Except for the slope of his shoulders, he wasn't old at all. Just that grey and white under his hat. And he had brown, straight eyes. She wished hers were brown instead of blue.

At the turn of the street Henry looked back and nodded and touched his hat. She blew him a kiss. Returning to the hall she closed the door carefully and listened upstairs. There was no sound. Nothing had been seen or heard. She got her books and went out the back way to school.

CHAPTER IX

Half-way through the second week of February, Eddie Michelson, who was a Junior, but came to the general study hall between classes, threw a note down the aisle. Agnes put her foot on it until Professor Robinson looked the other way, then picked it up and read it behind her *General History*.

Eddie's O's were as round as his face, and his R's hunched

both their shoulders like he did. Eddie was a funny boy. Agnes liked him a lot.

" Old Robinson says we can have a Valentine box in here after hours on Friday," the note read. " Shouldn't be surprised if you got a surprise if you stayed."

Stella, who appeared absorbed in Cæsar's *Gallic Wars*, caught the flicker of the note and watched Agnes read. Without any apparent relaxation in her pursuit of the Belgæ, she did some thinking. Nobody could call Eddie handsome, but his irreverent and irrelevant ways gave her little shocks that she liked. Then, too, the Michelsons were far and away the richest people in town. They lived in the house that Henry Barnet had once owned, and kept two hired girls to wait on them, and a man to drive the carriage. Besides that, Eddie was going to Berkeley when he finished High, and boys who went to Berkeley left steady girls behind that they asked down for big football games and such.

Following her reflections, Stella made sure that old Robinson was still interested in the other side of the room, wrote four lines on the fly leaf of her Cæsar and passed the book to Agnes.

Agnes saw it coming her way, from hand to hand, and the old empty place under her belt hollowed out again.

" Don't let's be silly any longer," the message read. It was written in the small hand that always got Stella ten extra credits on examination papers. " We like each other best. Meet me at the bakery when we get out at noon."

Agnes consolidated her forces enough to nod acceptance. It was out of the question to try to write. Her hands wouldn't go. As it was, the book all but dropped when she started it on its way home. She didn't want to be clumsy again, now that Stella had given her another chance.

Opposite the school was a small emporium where immediate needs in the way of pencils, marshmallow bananas, tablets, pickles, erasers, and indigestible bread-stuffs were supplied to students. Agnes didn't go to the bakery. She

ate lunch from a box, walking, as though that was what she'd rather do. But she wouldn't rather. The bakery was Eden, and lunch from a box was a badge of exclusion. Now she was not only going to the bakery—but she was going with Stella.

When dismissal rang, she left her box behind and crossing the street without quite knowing how she managed it, stood at the bakery counter looking down.

Presently Stella came. Neither spoke. Side by side, contemplating wedges of pie, they signed their articles of peace in silence. After a while Stella began indicating requirements to a wispy-haired girl back of the counter.

" Two of each," she specified. " In separate bags."

Handing one bag to Agnes, Stella glanced at the bakery door. Eddie was passing with another Junior.

" I forgot." Stella returned to the wispy girl. " We each want that and that—and a piece of pie."

Bags were handed back and larger ones substituted. It was a groaning feast of reconciliation that Stella spread.

Returning without the other Junior, Eddie banged through the bakery door.

" Going to ? " he exploded at Agnes. She was glad of his resemblance to a tornado. Something tumultuous made it easier with Stella. " Going to—like I said ? "

" Oh, hello." Stella looked over a cinnamon bun as though reverberations of Eddie had penetrated that buffer. " Whatever are you doing here, Eddie Michelson ? Every single place I go I look around and there's you."

" Don't sass your grandpap." Eddie's blast recurred. " What ails your little friend ? Cat got her tongue ? "

" Hello," Agnes said inaudibly, also through a cinnamon bun.

" What say ? " Eddie cupped a hand back of an outstanding ear. " Speak so's the old man can hear—that's a good girl."

Stella tucked a propelling arm under Agnes' elbow and faced them both about.

" You'd think some people owned a place ! " she sniffed. " Let's see if we can find a little peace outside."

Agnes felt a sting of pity for Eddie.

" I'll ask if I can stay," she said as she went with Stella.

In the warm sunshine beyond the bakery Stella flounced prettily as though freeing herself of annoyance.

Completing her flutters, she nestled to her companion until their hair touched and mingled.

" Old Eddie Michelson ! " she exclaimed in a scandalised whisper. " Isn't he the worst ? Every place I go—why yesterday in the library when Miss Hepburn went out—— No, I won't tell. I don't care how you beg me to, I won't tell. Just because he talks about people I like is no reason I'll carry stories back. Aren't men vile ? What'd he mean, just now, in the bakery—about staying in or something ? "

" Nothing—I—he only said there'd be a Valentine box——"

" Of all things ! " Stella stood away in horror. " And he asked you to stay after all he said in the library yesterday ! If that isn't two-faced ! Why, he said—— No, I won't tell. But go ahead and stay, if you want to, and see what you get. I bet he's back there in the bakery now picking out the worst comic he can find."

Agnes couldn't eat. She had to drop bits of the lunch in the grass when Stella didn't see. They didn't talk. Stella kept repeating, " Of all things—and he's back there now picking out the worst they've got. Aren't men vile ? "

It was necessary to repass the bakery when the bell rang. Agnes didn't want to look, but her head turned involuntarily. Inside, Eddie bent over the counter where good and evil valentines were displayed. Even with his back turned, she could see by the slant of his ears that he was grinning. She was glad she'd made up with Stella, of course. But just the same the place under her belt was hollower than ever.

She didn't stay for the Valentine box. Terrified that the dreaded comic would search her out, even in hiding, she waited in the cloak-room for Stella, prepared to run at the

first warning. Stella was going part way home with her. At the last minute Agnes dared to stay, another girl brought a message to the effect that Stella was furious, but she had to make up back notes in physics and it would take at least an hour.

Sliding from the cloak-room, crouching away from the glass doors of the study hall, Agnes got down stairs, and out.

Eddie surveyed study hall after everyone was in and the doors closed, and got mad. He was no dissembler. When he got sore he didn't care who saw. Glowering and hunched in his seat, he emitted contemptuous snorts during the whole half-hour that old Robinson made a jack-ass of himself being what he called Cupid's messenger. Robinson went in for mildewed jests about the embossed envelopes that he delivered from the box. Eddie was having no truck with embossed envelopes. Every time one of the leprous things came his way, he shoved it to the edge of his desk with a pencil and left it there. When everything had been given out except a pink-wrapped, ribbon-tied envelope which remained unclaimed on top of the box, Robinson tapped his dismissal bell. It was about time. Eddie was the first man out.

Stella remained in her seat, smiling demurely over the tender tokens she had received. When everybody else left the room she still sat and smiled, the corner of one eye on the pink oblong on the box. She was waiting for an event which, in due course, occurred.

Banging, the door flew wide to admit Eddie, who surged straight for the pink object. When he was half-way there Stella coughed discreetly. The boy came to a stop that jolted a sound from him, and, slumping into a seat which wasn't his, made out he was looking for a book.

" Oh—you here ? " he exclaimed when he finally had to straighten and show a face like a carved brick.

" Uh-huh." Stella continued to read and smile.

" Lookit—where is she ? " Eddie questioned with a gulp.

" Who ? " Stella swam from her reverie. " You mean Agnes ? Oh—she went home. Listen Eddie—this is from Chuck Stubbs, I bet.

" ' Of all the maids that come my way,
You surely are the sweetest.
Your eyes—— ' "

" Shut up ! " Eddie could stand only about so much. " I know a droolinger one than that. It's up there. You can have it if you go get it."

Gurgling and tip-toeing Stella got the pink oblong, and untied the ribbons.

A pillowish plateau of blue satin, bursting into celluloid geysers at the corners, came from the paper. Eddie's blazing countenance took on purplish hues of distaste as a pestilential exhalation of sachet escaped. He gagged when Stella thrust her nose into the very source of the stench.

" Ooh ! " she cooed. " Um—good ! Eddie, you're just sweet. I could——"

She moved a step towards him. Frantically Eddie shot sideways from his seat and plastered himself against the wall.

" Go away." He moved his hands before him desperately. " Get out ! Go away ! Go home ! "

Stella halted, the suggestion of a quiver about her mouth.

" I wasn't going to hurt you," she sniffled daintily. " Just because I want to say thanks, is no reason you should talk to me like I was Wigwam."

Eddie couldn't dissemble about contrition either.

" The smell makes me sick," he attempted to explain. " You'd better borrow a spade and bury it quick. I think it's died."

The quiver became something else.

" Eddie Michelson, you're the killingest," she giggled, and went back to her seat.

Everything Eddie got, he got badly. His repentance

progressed like a disease. Blundering around the room for a while, he came and stood by Stella.

" Lookit," he said. " You can keep that if you can stand the smell. The ribbons are nice anyway. My mother got them and tied them on."

" I——" Stella managed the quiver again. " You kind of hurt my feelings. You acted like——"

" Lookit ! " Eddie couldn't stand the quiver. " There's a horse and buggy at home I can have when I like. If I drive around—maybe to-morrow—Saturday——"

Stella drew herself up. The time was ripe to be haughty.

" Thanks," she said. " You can't drive me around, just to show Agnes Barnet——"

Eddie considered. As a matter of fact showing Agnes Barnet had been in the back of his mind.

" Agnes can jump in the creek," he said deliberately and thoughtfully. " I asked her politely to do me a favour, and all the answer I got was for her to run home. Now she can go jump in the creek."

Stella dropped her small nose to the plateau again. She didn't giggle. She purred like a kitten over a saucer of cream.

" What time shall I be ready to-morrow ? " she asked.

" Any time. I'm apt to come any time."

The door bumped and swung as he went out.

CHAPTER X

Walter Morgan—Uncle Walter Morgan—was coming to town. Martha's prophecy about her sister had never been fulfilled. Aunt Lettie had not come back. The supposition was that she hadn't suffered enough yet. And here was Uncle Walter sending a telegram to say he was on his way to Yuba County to look at some timber and would stop in El Stancias between trains.

Agnes couldn't quite get used to his being called Uncle Walter. The title had been bestowed only since old Mr. and Mrs. Morgan had died and money had come from San Francisco to send numerous remaining Morgans to Sacramento to go into business and to school. Before that, the word Morgan wasn't spoken at home at all. At least, not by Mama. Sometimes at breakfast Papa told what a nice girl Lettie had been. But when all that about the brothers and sisters happened, Mama said at dinner one night—speaking to Agnes instead of her husband as was the custom of the table :

" Your Uncle Walter must be doing well. He's gone into real-estate, I hear. Let's hope Lettie has sense enough to get some property in her own name. A woman's never safe if she doesn't hold the title to her own home, at least."

Papa had pushed back his chair and gone to his own room. But Walter Morgan had become Uncle Walter, and now he was coming to call on his relatives.

" I'm going to the station to meet Walt," Henry said next day with a trace of defiance. " And I'm going to bring him home for dinner."

" Certainly," Martha answered. " He's my own sister's husband, isn't he ? "

Martha accorded credit to herself for recognising Walter as Lettie's husband. She felt it was an indication of broad-mindedness when a person could separate one set of facts from another and dwell upon the good. Walter was not so free from prejudice as Martha. He wrung Henry's hand at the station, but he demurred about dinner.

" The train up-country goes out mornings," Henry reminded him.

" Sure, I know that," Walter answered uneasily. " But I thought if I took a room at the hotel and turned in early and got a good night's rest——"

" Martha said for me to ask you," Henry said quietly.

It was the quietness of Henry's voice that did the work.

" Sure I'll come," Walter said. " Lettie said for me to

look you all up. She's a great one for patching old troubles. And I always try to do what Lettie asks."

Henry took off his straw hat and wiped the band inside.

"I closed the store for the afternoon," he said, "and stopped by the Livery and Feed to have a team hitched. Want to show you around. Several things you'll be surprised at. Michelson's breaking ground for a new building for the insurance company, and the council's started laying wood block paving around the Square."

"Fine," said Walter, glad he wouldn't have to spend the afternoon with Martha, at any rate.

"I thought maybe we'd drive by the old place too. Leila Michelson's done it over right well, with porches where the old drive used to be and so on. Every now and then, when I get a little time, I go by and look at the acacias I planted in the yard."

"Where's the rig?" Walter couldn't stand hearing about the acacias. "Tied here, or still at the stable?"

"We'll stop by and get it," Henry said. "Then drive on and say howdy to Martha."

Saying howdy to Martha wasn't as bad as Walter had feared. Her greeting was valiant, though reserved.

"Walter!" she said in hushed oratory. "It's time to let bygones be bygones and start again, isn't it? Blood is thicker than water, and Lettie——"

Walter was not so heroic. He quailed at the door and couldn't go in.

"Hank's got a team outside," he said. "We thought we'd get our ride in and then come back."

Martha had seen the team, but she naturally supposed Walter had hired it. Henry's going in for the best rig at the Livery and Feed put an entirely different light on the day's affairs. Her fine, overflowing beneficence diminished. When the two were gone spinning down the street, she asked herself if it didn't look queer for Henry, who turned pale every first of the month when bills came in, to go out and get a team for a whole afternoon, as though money

were no object to him at all? She'd noticed also that she wasn't invited to go along for a ride. It hadn't occurred to Henry Barnet that his wife might enjoy a holiday too.

Neither had Walter suggested her accompanying them. Men were all alike, selfish and egotistical. All they ever thought of was satisfying themselves. Poor little Lettie—married to an inconsiderate hulk like Walter Morgan! He was all man. Martha writhed to think of her delicate little sister at the mercy of a creature as male as Walter Morgan. Well, blood was thicker than water. If Lettie needed her sister, her sister would forget old wounds, and find means to go to her. She had heard that the Morgans had a house overlooking the Golden Gate, and kept a Japanese servant. It had been a long, long time since Martha had rested in a house with a servant. She cast about for means of going to Lettie when Lettie needed her.

At six, not a minute before, Walter and Henry returned from their drive, considerably enlivened. From the easy way they talked, one might suspect they had had a drink. Since the days of sherry and champagne and brandy in the house with plate-glass windows, Martha had dedicated herself to the proposition that alcohol and tobacco were evils with which Henry could not conscientiously compromise. Now Henry came home, not only with the manner of a man who had stopped at Geiger's Saloon on the way, but trailing an aroma of tobacco smoke. She drew her mouth very tight as she and Agnes set the meal on the table.

The two men ate like wolves. After dinner they talked. Rather, Henry listened with a culpable twinkle in his eye, and Walter talked. He was voluble on the subject of San Francisco.

"Greatest city in the world!" he boasted. "You ought to see what we're doing down there to take care of the gold and the Klondikers that will pour in on us in the fall. There's a sure enough strike they've made up at Dawson. Miners always waste their money—come easy, go easy—

and we're going to get what they drop. Got new hotels, new restaurants, new jewellery stores—even new girls on the water-front."

With a twitch of one eye Martha indicated Agnes, who sat entranced on the couch.

"Oh—the kid!" Walter winked openly at Agnes. "How about it, kid—think your pa and I ought to remove ourselves and our low talk down to Geiger's Saloon for the balance of the evening?"

Henry evidenced a slight spasm toward's Geigers.

"Don't go, Uncle Walter." Agnes begged, with eyes like blue saucers. "Talk some more."

Hoisting his big frame Walter went to the couch and tipped her face.

"She's a little Lettie," he said dreamily. "Only prettier —which is the biggest thing I could say for anyone."

On the way back to his chair he gave Henry a cigar and lighted one himself. Walter saw Martha's lips framed for remonstrance and cut her off.

"Well, as I was saying, gold up to about three times the national debt'll drop on San Francisco this fall." He tipped back until his chair creaked. "The Government'll have to build a lean-to on the mint, looks like. That's just from Dawson. And now there's talk of new diggings on the American side. Place called Nome. Nothing but a prairie of mud, I'm told, with gold in chunks the size of base-balls at the grass-roots. Seattle and the upper coast may get some, but even so, S. F. is in for a whopper of a boom. My business has jumped in advance. Hardly a boat comes down, even this early, but some sour-dough sends instructions to pick him out a cute little shack with nuggets for door-knobs, or a cow-ranch where he can raise enough steer beef to get the taste of sow-belly out of his mouth."

"Agnes, go to the pantry and find something for your uncle and your father to put their ashes in," Martha ordered.

Walter refused to be dampened.

" You can tell what's happening to business generally," he went on, " by what a kid from down back of Sacramento has done already. Lawson, his name is. Bill Lawson. You've heard of Bill Lawson. Why, he was raised not fifty miles from here on an asparagus bog that a dago on the river ran. Bad egg ; I guess. But that's neither here nor there."

" Seems like I have heard of Bill Lawson. Wasn't there a story about his running away with a girl——" Henry cut in.

" Sure. The rancher's daughter. Bill started for a cannery one night with a load of asparagus. The rancher knew he had the boat and the grass, but what he didn't know was that the lady was along. Well, sir, they steered right past the first cannery to one that was just starting up and didn't care how its stuff came to it. The girl——"

Agnes returned with two glass sauce dishes. Martha prepared to send her on more errands.

" Sit down." Walter waved Agnes towards the couch. " This is a fairy story I made up for little girls."

" Well, if it isn't true——" Martha was hesitant.

" It's interesting to hear how men get a start," Henry interrupted. " Go on, Walter."

" Well, true or not, they say Lawson sold the boat and the grass, and got enough out of them to buy a yellow chip and sit in a game with a lumber man who'd come down with a schooner of spruce from a one-horse mill he owned up the Oregon coast."

" You don't say." Buccaneering appealed to Henry.

" He came out of the game——" Walter paused for effect. " He came out with the spruce and the schooner and a half interest in the mill."

" Gambling——" Martha began.

" Oh, the timber man didn't do so bad," Walter explained. " He got Bill Lawson for a partner. The one-horse mill is running day and night now, with extra shifts for Sundays."

" Well—of course—if he helped the other man," Martha put in.

" Helped ! Say—Lawson could sell lumber to mud-diving ducks. That first schooner has run itself up to a fleet, and last summer when he dumped a cargo of warped green planks at San Pedro and his buyers refused them—what did he do ? Bought a couple of old orange groves close to Los Angeles, and hammered up a swarm of cottages—all porches and eaves. Calls them bungalows. You ought to see folks claw each other's shirts off to buy them. That's now. And what it's going to be when the Alaska boats come down, God knows."

Henry endeavoured to remember that piracy was bad ethics.

" It doesn't strike me that stealing and abduction are sound beginnings for a business," he said.

" I wouldn't worry about the girl. Maybe that part of the yarn is true, and maybe it isn't. As for the boat and the load, Lawson paid the rancher afterwards. Got too much business sense to leave that standing out against him."

Purged of the girl element, Martha saw a moral in the rise of William Lawson.

" It goes to show," she said, " that there is no lack of opportunity in the world. If a young, inexperienced boy can go among the virgin forests——"

Henry saw where the eloquence was heading.

" Guess I'll go down to the corner for a couple of cigars," he interrupted. " Don't like to smoke all of Walt's."

Martha gave him a look. The room was already foggy with smoke. Henry went. Walter relished his sister-in-law's discomfiture and settled down to make it worse.

" I don't know about Lawson among the forests," he chuckled from the depths of his chair. " But he certainly goes among the virgins. The dago's daughter was only a starter. Now he's fixed one of his boats up with blue and pink boudoirs——"

" Agnes, it's time for bed," said Martha.

" Leave her alone." Walter waved Agnes down. " Do her good to hear the facts of life."

" You and I differ about what is fact and what is something else," Martha said. " Do as I say, Agnes. Good night."

Agnes climbed rather noisily to the top of the stairs, and then quietly returned to the landing where there was a seat. Through the crack of the door below, fragments of conversation reached her.

" I hoped you had changed," Martha was saying. " I hoped you were going to church with Lettie."

" Sure I go to church with Let." Walter's chair creaked once more. " I'd go to sewing society and stitch forget-me-nots on doilies if she asked me. Fortunately she doesn't ask me. Let's got sense. So's the church, if you want to go into that. Dig down under the flub-dub and you'll see that the old girl who started it had something. Trouble with you, Martha, is that you won't dig. You see out-croppings that look good to you, and don't bother to get down under. If you didn't do so much damage, I'd say you were just plain short-sighted."

" Is it short-sighted of me to send my child where she won't hear your impure conversation ? "

" Fact isn't impure. Anyway it's damned useful, if it is. My guess is that Agnes has never heard a word of fact in her life—unless providence has supplied her with a few dirty-minded companions at school. But judging from the way you put providence out of the ring with Lettie, I'm afraid for Agnes. You wouldn't give a kid a decent chance to gather up a little wholesome dirt out behind the woodshed."

" I must ask you not to be obscene, Walter."

" And she looks like Lettie," Walter steamed ahead. " That's enough to make me fling a life-line to her over your protests, if I can. When I think of Lettie, raised the way you raised her, and what might have happened if

she'd married some bruiser who hadn't the patience to try to find out what ailed her, like I did—— Why, you'd got her so scared of doing anything you might not like, that you might as well have been in the room with us that first night——"

"Lettie did what I didn't like when she ran off with you."

"Everybody does what they're scared to do when the pressure against it gets more than they can bear. But I'm not going to fight that old ground over with you now. We're talking about Agnes."

The front door clicked. On the landing Agnes screwed back into a shadow, trying to be invisible. Henry came in, looked up, raised an eyebrow in her direction, and went into the living-room.

Agnes trembled, waiting for him to reveal her treachery. Then she breathed easily again. He wasn't going to.

"Better stay another day, Walt," was all he said. "Folks here won't like it that I've kept you to myself. I owe it to the town to take you around among the old-timers."

"Thanks, Hank. Maybe I can manage an hour on the way down. I'll drop into the store, if I can."

"Walter thinks we're not doing all we should for Agnes," Martha remarked drily.

"I didn't say that." The chair thumped down. "What I said was that you did too much."

"Martha is strong." Agnes was terrified at Henry's effrontery. "I don't think she knows how strong she is."

"Mothers have to be strong." Construing the remark into a text, Martha proceeded. "Strong for sacrifice. I sacrificed myself to Lettie. She didn't thank me for what I did. Nevertheless I go on with my own child where I left off with my sister. I sew for her and think for her and watch over her. I know when she goes to school and when she comes back. I protect her from undesirable companionship by making myself all the companion she needs. As long as

I can lift a hand, I shall stand between her and what Walter chooses to call facts. I impress my teachings on her, so that even when I am not with her, she is as aware of me as though I were there. Her life is happy and innocent——"

"Happy!" Walter burst out. "My God——"

"Walter, I must ask you not to swear in my house."

"All right. I won't. But you don't realise what that girl of yours is bound to run into some day. She's pretty now—even prettier than Lettie ever was—and she's going to be beautiful!"

Straining forward on the window-seat, Agnes heard. Beautiful! She was going to be beautiful! By exquisite steps her heart went up and up until it could go no farther because it had reached ecstasy.

Slipping off her shoes she went to her room and stood for a long time looking at the gingham-gowned reflection in the mirror behind the lamp. Blue eyes, slightly trembling mouth and chin, a rich fall of brown hair making waves down her temples. She thought she was a little skinny, perhaps. But if she ate oatmeal, as Papa said—Mama wouldn't have parsnips on the table—but if she ate oatmeal——

Because it had smiled with a covert smile on the day of her maturity, Agnes had put the picture of Rudolph Rassendyl away. Now she lifted a chair noiselessly into her closet and got it down from the shelf. Hanging it on the tack that still remained in the wall, she swayed before it.

"I'm going to be beautiful." She made the words with only her lips. "I'm going to be beautiful. Do you hear?"

CHAPTER XI

One day Miss Dommit, the English teacher, stayed in the Principal's room a long time. She came out with her face very red, walked with fierce short steps to her own desk and wrote a series of notes. Postponing a class in *The*

Ancient Mariner, she took the notes around, and different teachers read them aloud before school was dismissed. All girls, seniors excepted, were required to assemble in study hall at five minutes after three.

Miss Dommit was there at three. At six minutes past she closed the cloak-room door, the door into the corridor, and even the door to the cupboard where charts and clay casts for the drawing class were stored. After that she stood behind the desk and began.

"Several weeks ago the janitor reported something I could not believe. He said that gross indelicacies had been scratched on the frosted glass of the girls' wash-room. I told him if such things were there, they had been done by some intruder and not any girl or girls in this school. Instructing him to re-frost the glass and watch the entrances more closely, I dismissed the matter from my mind. To-day he went to the Principal. The glass has been re-frosted three times, and the indecencies reappear after each removal. To-day I have called you together to warn you that the practice is not going to be tolerated. The basement is being watched, and any girl or girls found at such inconceivable defilement of a public building will be dealt with. You may go now."

She struck the bell sharply.

Agnes felt her face and her whole body flame. She had seen the words. They were words that meant nothing, and yet meant everything in a realm which she must not enter. Guiltless, she wore the aspect of guilt because she had seen the words—because there were such words. Miss Dommit eyed her searchingly as she marched out.

On the street she alternately jarred on the side-walk, and floated sickeningly as though blown by wind. Maggie Doyle and Stella walked together, ahead of her, on their way home. They went straight as young trees, and as far apart, until they reached Doyle's lot. Then locking themselves together, they doubled forward in giggling hilarity.

CHAPTER XII

For a whole year after the Valentine affair, Eddie Michelson espoused misogyny. He'd called around on foot to tell Stella that business had come up which prevented his taking her buggy-riding. After that he maintained a remote attitude towards all girls, particularly Agnes. Weeks at a time he passed her in the hall without seeing her. Then suddenly, after summer vacation, and at the beginning of his last year in High, his memory and eyesight returned, and he nodded at her as classes passed. The nod was more than condescending. It was forthright, as though he wanted the associations that belonged to him, and was going to see that he got them.

One day in study hall he threw a note down the aisle. It conveyed the information that Mr. E. Michelson expected to graduate with the good old class of El Stancias, '99, and subsequently continue the quest of knowledge at the University of California in Berkeley.

" How about making up ? " it ended. " I'm a good guy, and you're the prettiest girl in school."

Agnes indicated L by sign language, went to the library and left a note in the Lab volume of the encyclopædia. In due time Eddie got it, and spent the remainder of the day grinning.

After that he took to riding his bicycle Saturdays. Limited as it was, he seemed to find the city of El Stancias worthy of exploration. Generally, in the course of his travels the Barnet house was passed at least three times.

Agnes always dusted the front room and brought flowers from the front yard on Saturday mornings. Though she invariably managed to be in view when Eddie passed, she couldn't help turning her back and pretending not to hear his bell.

Details like a turned back and a deaf ear didn't discourage Eddie. He'd slow down and grin. She could feel him grinning. Then he'd whistle provocatively and ride on.

One Saturday he didn't ride on. Agnes was in the yard, intent on a rosebush.

" Greetings ! " he said, dismounting. " How's crops ? "

Agnes managed to be startled.

" Oh ! " she dissembled. " You frightened me."

" Frightened you, nothing. I know my face is against me, but dogs and children like it."

" I've got to take these in." Agnes bundled the flowers in her arms, and then stood still. " They wilt fast hot mornings."

" What do you care ? Plenty more flowers, but only one me. I wilt like the dickens. Watch ! " He flopped precariously against his bicycle.

" You think you're funny, don't you ? " Agnes giggled.

" Sure. Don't you ? Say—looky ! If I get a wheel for you this afternoon, will you go riding ? "

" If I wanted a ride, I'd get a wheel of my own," she bridled.

" Sure, I know that. But would you get one just because I liked you to ride ? That's the question."

Agnes glanced at the living-room windows. There was no one behind them.

" But I can't." She said it with a catch of desire in her throat. " I—I'll be busy this afternoon."

" To-morrow ? "

" Oh Eddie—to-morrow's Sunday."

" So it is ! Great day, Sunday. Great day to ride."

She too thought Sunday would be a great day to ride. She'd learned how, in stolen lessons, from the boy next door, five minutes one day and five minutes the next, when her mother had to go out. At long intervals, those lessons were. But she'd learned, and now she wanted to go with Eddie, frightfully, and fiercely. But——

" Eddie Michelson," she said weakly, " you mustn't talk that way about Sunday. You make me ashamed."

" And you make me tired, if you want to know," Eddie flung back.

She hovered over her flowers trying to be unconcerned.

" I—I don't want to make anybody tired," she said. " So I'll go in." And turned.

" Say—wait a minute ! " She heard him leap, and his bicycle fall.

" Oh—— ! " she exclaimed as he came into the yard. " You mustn't." With her free arm she pushed him back. " You mustn't. I've got to go in."

Panic drove her up the porch steps and through the screen door. Inside, she paused and gathered breath and knew regret. No one was in the living-room. No one would have seen. She could have stayed another minute in the yard. Maybe even five. From far behind the living-room curtains she saw Eddie flash angrily away, light flying like needles from the spokes of his wheel. What fun to ride ! What fun it must be ! Far off—on the street—even on the roads among the hills. And with Eddie ! If she only had a wheel, she'd get it out and tear after Eddie now and tell him nothing else counted except that she wanted to ride with him.

" Agnes—— ! " Her mother called from the kitchen.

" Yes."

" What are you doing, dear ? "

" I finished dusting and got some flowers."

" Don't forget you've got to practise. Three hours to-day. Afterwards we'll take our sewing out in the yard at the back."

Practice. Sewing. And Eddie had asked if he might get her a wheel.

It wasn't her last chance at joy, however. Next Saturday Eddie stopped by with a new proposition.

" Looky," he said, and this time he too glanced at the living-room windows. " Looky—the Phi Nu's are going to give a dance next Friday night. Can you go ? "

A spasm of longing tightened her hands on her flowers, and a rose-briar punctured a skin of the finger.

" O—oh ! " She put the wounded member to her mouth.

" Gosh ! " Eddie was up the low terrace, handkerchief out. " Here, we'll wrap it up. Where's the water ? Any spigot out here ? "

The spigot in the yard made a noise in the kitchen when it was turned on. Agnes jerked her hand away from Eddie, and her flowers dropped.

" It doesn't hurt," she whispered hoarsely. " Really—it doesn't hurt."

" It does too. Let me see."

She put her hand behind her.

" It's nothing. Honestly. I do it all the time."

Eddie cocked a swift eye at the windows again, and came so close that he stood on the fallen roses.

" Lookit——" he urged. " Come to the dance with me."

An amazing, invigorating idea came to her. She would and could and should go to the dance with Eddie.

" I—I'll ask ! " she breathed.

" No—lookit ! " As though sensing her essential weakness, Eddie volunteered for the job that she might not, after all, put over. " I'll ask. I'm a great asker. Where's your mother ? "

Agnes' daring was consumed in alarm.

" Don't you dare ! " she gasped. " If you do, I'll——"

He jumped for the house. She jumped and got ahead of him. They stood challenging each other on the step to the porch. And then all at once they forgot everything, and sat down together on the step.

" That's right." Eddie patted her knee approvingly. " Let's talk."

She wanted to pat back. Patting Eddie wouldn't be like touching any other boy.

" Listen." Eddie tucked his head between his shoulders the way he did when he thought. " We'll manage it. It's going to be the best dance of the year. We'll tell her that. And we'll tell her I'll take good care of you."

Prospects of being taken care of by Eddie started dreams

in Agnes. She wanted to go with him. She could dance. Not only music lessons but dancing lessons had been insisted on by Martha. And Eddie could dance. Mabel Overman, who was a Senior, said he was the best dancer she knew. The two-step was the thing then, and Mabel gave breath-taking accounts of Eddie's speed and resolution on the floor. Agnes wanted to dance with Eddie so bad that she had to press her tongue against the roof of her mouth to keep from crying because, of course, she couldn't.

"Lookit." Eddie had further inducements. "If you'll go I'll hire a hack."

"Eddie Michelson!"

"Why not?"

"People can't go alone in a hack."

"What's the good of a hack if they're not alone?"

It was so witty that Agnes' tongue limbered with laughter.

"Listen." Eddie turned his cap in his hand, studying the lining. "If you won't go to the dance, I won't either."

The forgotten door behind them opened, and Martha Barnet stood, very handsome and very outraged—not a little like Juno, grown middle-aged and imperiously peeved at what went on every time her back was turned.

Agnes' first thought was to protect Eddie.

"He——" she floundered. "He—just stopped by."

"So I see." Regarding the boy on the top step, Martha saw the usurper of the house with the plate-glass windows, and recalled the seven months between his mother's marriage and Eddie's advent.

"So I see," she repeated, trying to sort her thoughts—to separate good from evil and dwell on the good. It was confusing. Eddie Michelson was everything he should not be, and at the same time his father owned the insurance company and a good many other things besides.

Eddie wasn't confused. He knew what he wanted, and stated it.

" I came to see if Agnes could go to the Phi Nu dance with me next Friday," he blurted out.

Still Martha wasn't sure which was the good and which the bad in Eddie Michelson. To give herself time, she resorted to rhetoric.

" I haven't let my baby leave me for parties yet," she said. " She's all I have, and as long as I can keep her——"

" Aw rats ! " Michelson's home life was a give and take affair in which each member saw how often he could take the wind out of the others' sails. " Nothing'll eat her."

Martha's mouth became small. She loathed the boy. But there was poetic justice in having the Michelson heir suppliant on the Barnet door-step. There would be an even more lyric justice in having El Stancias witness Agnes Barnet's departure for the Phi Nu dance with Eddie Michelson.

" See that nothing does eat her," she said ambiguously. " Come in the house, Agnes."

Wresting signs of advantage from the ambiguity, Eddie romped into the hall demanding confirmation of what he thought he had heard.

" You mean she can go ? " he shouted. " Thanks, Mrs. Barnet. Thanks."

Withdrawing from his obnoxious gratitude into the living-room, Martha picked up Agnes' duster.

" If you're through with this," she said, " put it away."

" I'm not through." Agnes took the duster but she couldn't leave. She had to know. She had to know whether she was going to the dance. Her practised ear had detected evasion in her mother's words.

Not so Eddie's. Drunk with joy, he barged into the living-room.

" It's going to be the best dance ever," he boomed. " Two mandolins and a piano to play."

Martha said nothing. Looking around the room Eddie approved it. Nice place. Kind of—like Agnes—kind of beautiful. There was a framed engraving on the wall that

riveted his attention. He'd always had a failing for lions, and here were a lot of them being stared down by a little squirt in nothing but a shirt.

" Skinny guy," he commented.

Agnes went cold. Daniel in the Lion's Den was one of the sacred vessels of her mother's faith. She looked at Martha. Mrs. Barnet's eyes were grey nails driving through Eddie, crucifying him on an invisible structure behind. But she said nothing. Eddie lost his absorption in art, and returned to business.

" I'll call for Agnes at eight," he said. " If you'd rather we went on the street-car along with the others than in a hack, we'll do that. It's at Native Sons' Hall, and there'll be a special car both ways for the crowd."

" Certainly," Martha said grimly, " you'll go in the car with the others. And now, if you don't mind, Agnes and I have our Saturday work to do."

The house was redolent of baking. At home when Eddie and his mother smelled fresh bread, they raced each other to the kitchen. On a chance that that was the practice here too, he waited. Apparently it wasn't. He fingered his cap.

" Thanks for saying she can go," he said. " Thanks a lot."

Eddie might take consent for granted, but Agnes couldn't. An iridescent bubble of hope had been blown, but she daren't speak for fear it should burst. Martha accorded no sign save weighted, brooding silence. With stretched nerves, Agnes practised and took her sewing to the back yard. It was not till evening, when she and her mother were getting dinner together, that the tension broke.

" There's that white silk shawl of mine," Martha said, as though plans had been under discussion all day. " It would look nice made into a slip under something thin. You'll need slippers. Girls have to have clothes when they begin taking their place in a town."

Agnes swayed in suspense, the caster for the table chattering in her hands.

"You mean—I can go?" she asked.

"The Phi Nu is the best fraternity here. You've as good a right to go to its parties as anybody."

Rapture welled up, and after it a black flood of compunction.

"But—— Oh, Mama—your white silk shawl!"

"It's all I have left to give you—and so of course it's yours."

"Am I——" the caster rang. "A dress—you mean I'm to have a regular party dress? Low-necked and everything?"

"You're going on sixteen." The statement was a knell of tragedy. "I'll go down Monday and look around the stores. It's the first of the month, and that will give us thirty days before the bills come in. There'll be trouble when they do, but as there's always trouble anyway, we might as well have something to make up for it, once in our lives. Organdie would be nice. It would show that the silk underneath was good."

The caster stopped ringing. Agnes had turned cold at mention of the first of the month.

"Oh——" she faltered. "Maybe—I'd better not go. I don't think I really want——"

"You're going!" Martha wheeled from the sink. "I've thought all day and I've decided. It's enough that I have no position with the people I used to know. You're going to take the place you're entitled to. And you're going to have clothes to wear when you do it. No Michelson can take a girl of mine out and have the satisfaction of seeing that they've taken not only her home, but the very garments off her back as well. You're going with Leila Michelson's son, and if anybody so much as whispers about what it costs, they'll hear from me."

Agnes put the caster on the table, but her wrists still ached as though weighted.

"Really," she said from the dining-room, "I'd—rather not. It will make trouble—and I'm so tired of trouble."

" Tired ! " Martha whipped up a fury. " If you're tired, what do you think of me ? I've had sixteen years of moving from a good house to a worse one ! I've had sixteen years of watching your father's business dwindle from a store on the Square to a burrow on a back street. Don't talk to me of trouble. You—who've had every living thing done for you that mortal mother could do. Tired ! Well, I'm tired too ! I'm tired of being nobody and going nowhere——"

Collapsing solidly on a kitchen chair, Martha flung her arms across the cool oilcloth of the table, and, dropping her head upon it, wept. Agnes flew from the dining-room. It was the old, terrible thing over again. Should she get a damp towel first, or try to stop her mother's shattering malady before it ran its course ?

" You know it's not because I'm ungrateful." Deciding on the latter course she came to her knees beside the kitchen chair. " Or because I don't know. You're wonderful. Everybody knows you're the most wonderful mother a girl ever had. I owe you everything. Nothing I can do in my whole life will make up what I owe you. Of course I'll go to the party, if it means all that to you. I'll go and show people we're as good as anybody. And all the time I'm there I'll remember you sent me—cut up your lovely shawl for me—and ran bills——"

Martha surrounded the unnerved child with her arms. Kneeling, Agnes was strained to the substantial bosom. Tears fell from two pairs of eyes and widened the damp spot on the starched bib of Martha's apron.

" You've got to go," Martha sobbed. " Leila Michelson took my house. It's time she saw—its time all this town saw——"

Locked so close that not even a thought could come between them the woman and the girl rocked and wept.

CHAPTER XIII

Agnes saw that life was without form or plan or explanation. It lived itself through its creatures without their consent or understanding, and then drew aside and dealt with them mercilessly, divulging no interpretation of its methods.

For two nights after the emotional outbreak in the kitchen she slept badly. When she closed her eyes bills and shawls and slippers and firsts of the month marched before her in half-dream, half-awake parade. Martha had recovered as she always did. Tempests left her as revived as a well-rooted tree after a storm. But Agnes was different. She suffered afterward, more even than at the time.

Two days and nights of trouble passed, and then, suddenly when the week was half gone she awoke towards morning of another day to find her malady gone. Health had come from the spring air that touched her face and caressed her outflung arms.

Sweet heavy languor filled her room. There was a soft breeze that alternatively sucked the window curtains against the screen and bellied them into luminous balloons. Turning back the sheet that covered her she sighed with long sustained inhalations and exhalations at the touch of wind upon her limbs. The night was neither dusky nor terrifying. White and still, it filled the chamber with an incandescence like the silver backing of a mirror. Beyond the curtain and the screen a street lamp was whiter than the light. Its whiteness moved and swelled with the swelling of the curtains.

She turned and breathed, and turned and breathed again, as though she could never have enough of the strange whiteness against her skin.

Presently, as if a cat were pushing it, the door at the foot of the bed opened. First a strip of darkness from the hall was all that showed. The strip widened and became a panel of black with Martha silhouetted in white upon it.

She wore no wrapper. Her night-gown made a starched ghost of her in the wide black panel.

The ghost moved forward and bent over the bed.

" Are you asleep ? " it asked. " I've listened to you turning and tossing for an hour. For the last fifteen minutes at least I've been standing outside the door."

" I wasn't asleep."

" Why weren't you ? Girls of your age ought to sleep."

For no reason that she knew, Agnes' heart began to romp and pound. Martha pulled the sheet over the bare-limbed child and sat down, sagging the springs at the edge of the bed.

" You'd better tell me," she said.

Agnes answered only with silence and a pounding heart.

" I had certainly hoped I would never need to talk to you about this." The sagged springs wheezed. " If you'd been a boy I should have expected to watch. But you're a girl. We can't take any chances, however, and so, no matter what it costs me to do it, and the bitter disappointment involved in having to do it, I must face my duty and warn you. Sin brings punishment, Agnes. No sins are so secret that they are not seen and punished. They bring insanity. There are asylums filled with helpless, drivelling children——"

" Mama—— ! " It was a suppressed shriek, and Agnes sat up.

" Now, now," Martha put her down again. " No nerves. Little girls don't have nerves. I've warned you, and you've heard my warning and will heed it—and there's nothing more to bother about. Why, you're like ice. And on a night like this. I'll pull the blanket up and tuck you in. So—like that. Close your eyes and get some sleep. You're all right now. Good night, my baby—and happy dreams."

Floor-boards spoke as she left the room. Curtains sucked to the screen and bellied out. Furniture stood flat and nauseating in the light that was as pallid as the backing of

a mirror. Agnes saw the room and the world outside the room where hiding-places were filled with children that lisped and drivelled. God—Oh, God !

CHAPTER XIV

The organdie that was to go over the silk lay, crisp as frost, on the sewing-table, folded until the long streamers of flowers strewn over it faded and faded, each into innumerable shadows of itself.

The shawl, cut beyond recall, ran silkily under the presser foot of the sewing-machine. Invigorated and renewed, Martha Barnet was almost her old self again. She sang crooningly as she worked. It had been a long time since she had last felt the kind of materials she liked in her hands. No vapour from the bleached night through which she had passed clung to her. Having dealt with a situation she was through with it and ready for another. Agnes had come from school, rather pale and washed-out, and was sitting in her mother's rocking-chair.

" You'll have to go along with me down to Clark's and fit the slippers." Martha spoke easily over the rattle of her sewing. " I looked at the styles, and they're showing a lot of white this year. But black will go with more things."

Automatically Agnes responded to the fillip of slippers. And she adored the organdie with flowers fading into dimmer flowers among its folds. The white silk had come through washing and ironing, slick and cool. Eddie would like the dress. He would whistle and say something cyclonic when he saw it. He would try to tell her confidentially how pretty she looked, and his voice would get away from him and everybody would hear. Eddie had the hugest voice.

Little spurts of happiness released themselves inside Agnes. Life lost its incomprehensible menace and became

a conglomeration composed of Eddie, Mama, new slippers, and waltzes and two-steps only two days away.

" Let's get black then." She began to vision slippers, black and shining, with pointed toes stuffed with cotton so they wouldn't turn up. " Black's always nice."

" We'll go to-morrow." Martha approved a beautifully run French seam. " Now if you'll go down and start dinner, I'll cut out the organdie and baste some of it up while the light's good. I've been working on a surprise for you all day, and am a little behind with the dress."

" Surprise ! What—tell me what ! "

Electrified by the idea of a surprise, Agnes sprang towards the machine and her mother. Martha laughed and pushed her back.

" I said a surprise, didn't I ? You'll know just before you go Friday night. Now run along and start dinner. Hurry."

Agnes ran, laughing. The whole house frolicked with her, shimmering its excitement over the surprise to come. The kitchen was bright and spacious, dilated with the gas of a fresh fire, and the cool of evening after heat. Whatever in the world could the surprise be ? Potatoes emerging juicily from long curled peelings under the paring knife repeated the question. Everything was so gay that Agnes had to repeat a rune so that she wouldn't forget anything as she set the table.

" Bread and butter," she chanted softly, " knives and forks and spoons. Pepper, napkins, cups and saucers, and a tile to put the tea-pot on."

Dinner was a let down after such mirthful preparation. Nothing was said about the new party dress, or even the surprise. Nothing was said about anything. Papa sat in his place. Once he tried to tell a joke, but it didn't pan out well. Martha passed him the vegetable in response, and that was all. She never liked his jokes.

Between the two Agnes ate methodically, trying not to think of Eddie and the party dress and the surprise. Thoughts made echoes that started trouble sometimes. And it wasn't

necessary to really think of Eddie. He was there, whether she thought of him or not.

When the meal was finished Martha helped with the dishes. Henry brought in kindling for the next morning and whittled shavings. Having learned to build fires with shavings when he was a boy, nothing would turn Henry to newspapers now. The fact was significant to Martha. Refusal to progress. The key to his whole life.

After the shavings Henry got a paint catalogue and lay on the couch in the front room. It felt good to turn his toes up and wriggle them in his shoes. He wished he dared to kick the shoes off, and lie there in his sock feet. Wishing that, he fell asleep and the catalogue dropped.

What Martha really wanted to do was to light a lamp in her room and sew. But the machine would make a noise. Henry might waken and ask what was up. She'd better read. Doing the lesson twice a day for a while might be a wise precaution. God must be propitiated and trouble averted when the bills came in.

She got her books and brought them downstairs to read. The lesson was particularly good that week. All about Light shining in darkness. There should be at least seven ruffles on the organdie skirt. Ten would be better, with lace whipped on. There wasn't time for hand whipping. It wouldn't do to put poor lace on nice material. Ten ruffles each six yards long, made sixty yards. Ten yards to a bolt of lace. Six bolts for the skirt and at least one for the waist. There was a reference in last week's lesson that she thought she would look up. " All things that the Father hath are mine." The Daylight had a lovely assortment of ribbons. Organdie dresses require sashes. Agnes mustn't be deprived of what was right for her to have just because her mother was afraid and her father unreasonable about bills. Turning to the fly-leaf of a book she found a text she had written down. It was " Be not afraid." She decided to get seven bolts of the lace and four yards of sash ribbon when the Daylight opened in the morning.

CHAPTER XV

Trumpets of silver could have added nothing to the orchestra in Native Sons' Hall on Friday night. Mabel Overman was right when she said Eddie could dance. Held sternly at the conventional distance, Agnes learned what it was to aim at heaven from one end of a hall, and then tear along and crash through its gates at the other.

She was electric with well-being. Her cheeks were as clear as ruby glass. The surprise had been a cape—a sure enough party cape—of soft blue cloth with softer blue velvet for a collar. The flowered organdie had more ruffles than any dress had ever had before, and its sleeves stuck out farther even than Stella's. When she danced with Eddie he was a part of her and she of him.

He said the killing things he always said.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed. "If I only had on a pair of tights I'd go ahead and spout like Romeo."

They were cooling off on a balcony that overhung a street. Below were roofs, and beyond the roofs rose mountains, black and mysterious. Stars made patterns in the sky. A choir of frogs had met for practice in some hidden pond. Down the valley side of town an engine snorted and complained as it dragged a glimmering tail of coaches upward. Eddie wiped his steaming face with a handkerchief.

"But I haven't got the tights," he said, "so it wouldn't make sense."

"I think you make sense," Agnes replied solemnly.

"You've got to meet my mother," Eddie bellowed abruptly. "She's the one in our family that can talk. Tell you what! Come over to our house to dinner some night soon."

"Who's asking me, you or your mother?" Agnes elected to be coy.

"Mother'd be tickled to death."

"Maybe my mother——"

" So'd she be tickled. Why not ? Doesn't she want you to have a good time ? "

" My, but you're conceited."

" I ought to be—with your liking me."

" Eddie Michelson ! "

" Hush that ! Sounds like Stella. Lookit—I'll come in to-night when we get to your house, and holler up and ask your mother if you can come to-morrow."

" If you so much as dare ! I'd have you to know I was scared last Saturday."

" Why ? " Eddie crowded close, interested, imperative.

Agnes' thoughts began to plunge.

" All right, you can ask." She edged away from him. " But not to-night. And you mustn't holler—ever. Anyway, I couldn't go to-morrow—not after being up to-night."

Eddie pulled out a bench.

" Sit down," he said. And then, " I won't touch you."

But he did touch her. He crowded again. She moved, a bit at a time, until they came into the light from a window. She could see his face. Such a funny face—and as serious as death.

" When I talk to her I'm going to ask more than just for you to come to dinner." He breathed gustily. Gusts of her own breath solidified in Agnes' throat and became small, hard apples, swallowed whole.

" I'm going to school in the fall," he explained, " and it's got to be settled that you're my girl before I go. Then you can come down to dances and games and stuff like that."

" But——" Beginnings of protest got past the apples.

" Bring your mother along," Eddie hastened. " I'll see you're both put up in good shape."

Agnes couldn't speak.

" And that's not all, either," Eddie went on like the exhaust of an engine. " You're going to be my girl. See ? And to-night, when I say good-bye, just to make sure—you're going to let me kiss you."

" Oh ! " The apples dissolved and became a fluid that flooded Agnes. " Oh—Eddie Michelson—if you so much as try——"

" Why not ? Other girls do when things are fixed up."

" Not nice girls."

" You're wrong. It's the nicest thing nice girls do."

" You mustn't—you mustn't even talk—— If you talk that way—I'll never speak to you."

Eddie took the ultimatum under consideration. He was silent so long that Agnes got scared. She let her elbow touch him, and the effect was galvanic. Eddie grabbed the elbow against his side and held it there. She could feel his heart going bump, bumpety, bump. She shivered. Shivers running through her were like grasses brushing each other in a wind.

" All right." There were echoes of shivers in Eddie too. " I won't talk that way—until next time. Let's dance."

Stella was at the party. She smiled at Eddie over Chuck Stubbs' shoulder as though there were some joke that only she and Eddie knew. When " Home, Sweet Home " had been played, and it was time to catch the special car, she drew Agnes into a corner of the dressing-room.

" Hasn't it been the funniest party ? " she whispered. " If it wasn't so late, I'd tell you how funny it's been."

The old quick love of Stella stirred in Agnes.

" Tell me——" she urged. " There's time."

" Maybe you wouldn't think it was so funny." Stella eyed Agnes' dress. She put up her arms to pat her smooth hair. They were cool, cream-coloured arms. An unwithered rose lay in the ruffle over her shoulder. Nothing ever faded on Stella. Agnes was rumpled and blown, but the pallor of Stella's body kept even her flowers alive.

" I would, too, think it was funny," Agnes begged. " Go on—tell. Maybe's there's something I could tell too." She blushed then. It was awful to offer to buy Stella with Eddie—but Stella had to be bought.

" Sure enough ? " The black points of the other girl's

eyes glittered. She held the wonderful cloak that had been Martha's surprise. Envy of the coat carried her farther than she intended to go. " Well, maybe—if you've got something to trade. Tell you what ! Come home with me and stay all night, and we'll talk."

" I can't—hurry—tell me now—it'll be too crowded on the car."

" Why can't you come to my house ? "

She had the look she had had that awful day when Maggie was mad. Agnes couldn't let her have that look. Anything was better than that Stella should have that look.

" You come with me." The invitation jumped out of its own accord. It was given, and Agnes couldn't take it back. No matter what resulted at home, she couldn't take it back. The look went out of Stella's face. " You've got a telephone," Agnes went on, daring all now. " Telephone your mother from the drug-store that you're coming with me. Eddie and I will make the car wait for you."

Stella's red little mouth seemed to be saying things to itself.

" All right," she spoke aloud at last. " I will."

Eddie was anything but pleased at the arrangement. He blamed Agnes immediately and vengefully. When Stella went into the drug-store to telephone, he followed her, leaving Agnes to hold the car with Chuck Stubbs.

Other girls had taken all the seats when the two came from the telephone. Stella reached for a strap and swayed against Eddie. As the car got under way she said the strap was too high, and could she hold on to Eddie instead ? He growled as she steadied herself against him. He tried to move, but couldn't without letting her drop. He could feel her against him, even through her clothes and his. Starched petticoats, a dress and a cloak could not conceal the fact of a very sleek Stella inside. At the corner below the Barnet house the car stopped, and Agnes and Chuck descended first and went ahead. Stella clove to Eddie, slipping a hand into the pocket where his own fist was doubled.

" Whew ! " she breathed. " What a night ! "

Eddie's internal ferment escaped at an implied reflection on the Phi Nu's.

" Darned good party," he said.

" Oh, not the party." Stella's voice was satin. " It just makes me a little tired to see Agnes Barnet pick people up and throw them down again when she's through. But I don't care. I'm sick of Chuck."

" I suppose that's not picking folks up and throwing them down," Eddie grumbled. " Oh, no ! "

It was a long block from the car line to the turn towards Barnet's and a half block after that. Stella dragged steadily on Eddie's pocket, holding his pace down to hers.

" My land ! " she laughed softly. " Poor Chuck—listening to baby talk."

" She doesn't talk baby talk," Eddie flared. But his temper was moderating. Stella was reviving his wounded self-esteem.

" Oh, of course she doesn't exactly say ' goo ' and ' did 'um.' " Stella snuggled so close it seemed probable she would climb into the pocket with her hand. " But of all the sillies ! "

" Come on ! " Eddie didn't exactly want her in his pocket. " We'd better hurry and catch up. They've turned the corner already."

" What's the matter, Eddie ? " Enveigling one slim finger into the clenched fist in the pocket, Stella stopped, and brought him to a halt. " Don't you like your little Stella any more ? "

" Sure. Oh, sure."

" Then act like it. Say so."

" I just did."

" These darned sleeves ! " She twitched her shoulders fretfully. " I didn't have time to tuck them in right in the dressing-room, and the stuff they're made of scratches."

" Well, you'll be where you can take them off in a minute."

" Nassy red marks on Stella's shoulder if she waits. Fix Stella's sleeve. Eddie fix Stella's sleeve." She turned half around in front of him.

" Fix 'em yourself." He tried to head her forward again.

" Ooh—such hurty red marks. You don't want Stella's nice little shoulder to hurt."

Small tempting hands held back the front of her coat. Eddie shuffled his feet. " Hurry," she said breathily. " I'll catch cold standing this way."

He thrust a hand across a shoulder. Stella turned until her breath played in his ear and contracted his scalp. Her skin was like the petal of a flower. Like the petal of an oleander. It swelled like the curved flesh of an oleander over her breast. Pressing close, Eddie kissed the mouth upturned to him. Her lips were open. Her tongue was like the pointed tongue of a bird.

" We'd better catch up with the others," Stella sighed and drew slowly away.

Eddie's eyes were as fixed as though made of glass. She kissed him again in a hasty little peck.

" We'd better catch up," she said.

CHAPTER XVI

Agnes waited on the porch until Stella came. It seemed minutes and hours and days. When the two girls went in Martha looked over the banister above, said nothing, and withdrew. The trouble would come to-morrow, after Stella went home, Agnes thought. Let it come. She'd never feel any other trouble now—after this about Eddie.

Stella stepped out of her clothes in the bed-room and folded them on a box by the window.

" Goody," she said standing in her chemise, " now I can sleep in this."

" There are night-gowns in the second drawer." Agnes indicated the bureau.

" I'm going to sleep in this. It feels good to have your arms out." She got into bed.

Agnes hung her party dress across the back of a chair to stoop in a night-long bow towards the floor. Then she blew out the light. Stella lay close to the wall. Agnes made herself straight down the outside rod of the bed.

" Go on," Stella broke the brittle silence. " Tell what you were going to."

" It wasn't anything I guess."

" Well, Miss Smarty, next time I get my mother up to tell her I'm staying with you, you'll know it."

" Please don't you be mad at me too."

" Was it about Eddie—what you were going to tell ? "

" But there isn't anything now."

" Listen——" Stella could handle Agnes as well as Eddie. " On the way from the car—Eddie said——"

" About me ? " Agnes whispered over her shoulder.

" Um—maybe."

" Tell me. Please——"

" After you. You tell first."

Agnes flopped over and whispered close to Stella's ear, her face half down in the pillow. She told it all. Every word of it. She laid Eddie's boyish love before the other girl, systematically and entirely. She said things she hadn't even thought explicitly before. How she knew when Eddie came into study hall, without looking, just by the prickles up her back. She said she didn't think he was homely. He'd—he'd asked to kiss her to-night. She might have done it if—if——

Appalled at what she might have done, Agnes could go no further, Stella waited, then sat up in bed and rebraided her hair.

" Aren't men vile ! " she said when she was down in bed again. " I'll never listen to one of them again as long as I live. All they want is to drag a girl down. That old Eddie Michelson asked you to kiss him to-night—and he did

kiss me. Just the minute you and Chuck turned the corner, he grabbed me like he was crazy. Aren't men vile ! "

Agnes didn't answer. She couldn't. Turning back she straightened out along the iron rod and felt the life drain from her and leave her dead.

" Night, night, precious ! " Stella yawned. " I'm all worn out."

Even the iron rod under Agnes didn't hurt. How could it when her life had drained away and left her dead ? Minutes passed and made up an hour. She knew it was an hour by the boom of the clock on the Court House. After a while it was another hour. Stella's steady breathing stopped and came in flutters. She was creeping close, for warmth perhaps. She didn't know there was no warmth in a corpse. Beyond the window the street lamp flared and guttered and flared again. It made a dawn and a night and another dawn in the room. Stella's breath was at the back of Agnes' head, in the hollow where her braids were parted. Stella was alive, but Agnes was dead.

The street lamp went out with a gulp. Morning had come so dimly it was only a little different from night. Stella's breath was light and warm between the braids. She rose on an elbow and looked down to make sure the other slept. The elbow went down cautiously and the breath was between the braids again. By imperceptible movements an arm slid forward, and a hand touched the yoke of Agnes' cotton gown. Under the yoke were two flat young breasts.

Agnes' body drew together in a spasm, and she pushed the hand away. Stella's breathing was the rhythmic breath of one who sleeps deeply.

CHAPTER XVII

There was no trouble about Stella's presence in the house next day. Martha had spent a half-hour thinking

after the two girls came home. The time had come for minor considerations to be brushed aside in favour of Agnes' place in El Stancias. She needed at least one girl friend, and the daughter of B. J. Winters came as near having social position as anyone in town.

Bustling about a late breakfast, she made Stella welcome.

" We haven't seen much of you lately," she said. Her graciousness was not hypocrisy. Policies change with changing prospects. Only narrow minds are consistent. " We were afraid you had forgotten us. Was the party nice ? "

" Perfectly gorgeous." For the first time in her life, Stella was a little afraid of Agnes. You never knew what a ninny like that might up and tell. It might be a good idea to butter Agnes and her mother up a little. " The best time I ever had in my life."

" Girls always have the best time they ever had in their lives," Martha laughed.

" Agnes looked just too sweet," Stella deferred to the washed-out looking member of the breakfast party who up to then had said not a word all morning. " I'm crazy about her dress. You make her the prettiest things of any of us, Mrs. Barnet."

Martha expanded. Stella was a sweet child. What in the world ailed Agnes ?

" Did you have a nice time at the party too, daughter ? " she asked.

Stella answered for Agnes.

" If she didn't, I don't know what she wants. She took my beau away from me. If you'll believe it, Mrs. Barnet, it was only at the last, coming home, that he remembered I was on earth at all."

" You mean the Michelson boy ? " Martha poured a generous spot of cream in the bottom of her coffee cup.

" I should say I do mean the Michelson boy. Things looked pretty serious for a while last night."

" Nonsense." Martha added two lumps to the cream. " Well, he's planning to go away next fall to be gone for four years except vacations. I don't think I need to worry."

Stella's technique was perfect.

" I'm going to race Agnes for Eddie before he goes," she said. " Eddie'll get into a good crowd down at Berkeley, what with his money and all, and'll ask his girl up home to come down for games and dances. That's what they all do. Ask their girls and their girls' mothers, and pay their train fare and hotel bill and everything."

" Shall I cook a couple of eggs for you and Stella ? " Agnes asked her mother.

" I couldn't eat a bite more than I've got," Stella said.

" Thanks dear, no." Martha was disappointed in Agnes. A girl who has had everything in the world done for her ought to show she appreciates it. " You can pour me a little more coffee though, if you don't mind." She turned to Stella. " Naturally, they'd have to invite the mothers too," she said.

" If he invites you, will you go, Mrs. Barnet ? " Stella asked. " I want to know, because if you won't, I'll have the advantage."

Martha liked the banter. Stella was a bright, smart girl.

" I'm not prepared to say." She answered lightly, but she was thinking in long, strong strokes. Ever since Walter Morgan's visit she'd been trying to see a way to get to San Francisco. Her little sister needed her and she, Martha, needed a trip and a change.

Agnes pushed her plate away.

" I'm not going down to Berkeley, or any place else to see Eddie Michelson," she choked. " And what's more, I shouldn't think Stella—after last night——" She took refuge in the other room.

Stella made an amusing grimace, forming the word " quarrel " with her mouth. She wondered what she'd better say next. It might take close work to prise Eddie

loose from Agnes, the way he had acted at the party. To work close one must be close. She decided to be a ray of sunshine to Mrs. Barnet.

Martha demanded facts to go on.

"Did Eddie say he wanted you to visit him at the University?" she called into the other room.

"Yes." The belligerent answer reeked of tears. "But before I'd go—— Before I'd visit Eddie Michelson——"

Plans were instantaneous with Martha. They pertained entirely to clothes. If one was going to need clothes in the future, the time to buy was now. Spring sales were remarkable at the Daylight this month. Agnes must look nice enough to surprise Eddie Michelson, and let him see he wasn't giving a charity patient a treat. Thank goodness, Agnes had a mother who wasn't afraid of work and could tailor shoulders like a professional, and work perfect buttonholes. Agnes looked best in blue. A touch of red always set off the brilliance that came to her cheeks when she was excited. Martha herself could do with a good coat and skirt, and two good shirt-waists supplied with high-boned collars. In Berkeley it would be a good plan to take Eddie to visit Lettie. It wouldn't hurt him to see that one Barnet at least still lived properly.

Her reverie would have continued indefinitely if Stella hadn't broken it.

"Us girls will do the dishes," she said.

"I'll straighten the front room then," Martha acquiesced. "Come and help Stella," she called to Agnes.

Straightening the front room she mused on Stella. How thoughtful she was to think of the dishes. The Winters were as much looked up to in El Stancias as the Michelsons or the Emmonses. Concerning the Michelsons, wasn't it time to forget Leila's unfortunate haste with Eddie? To judge was human, to forgive divine.

Stella came in smoothing her party dress when the dishes were done.

"Good thing my mother didn't make me a cloak like you

did Agnes," she said. " I'd look sweet, wouldn't I, streaking off home in a party cape this time of day ? "

" You'd look sweet in anything you wore," Martha said.

" My, but you're nice, Mrs. Barnet. I must hurry. Thanks for letting me come."

Martha kissed her.

" If Agnes' home isn't open to her friends," she said, " it isn't good for much."

After lunch Martha could restrain herself no longer and went to the Daylight Store to look around. Under the pressure of bargains she forgot to merely look, and began buying. Once given its head, her old passion ran away with her.

She got material for a suit for Agnes, and some plaid silk to go with it for a shirt-waist. Miss Totton, the clerk who had always been with the Daylight people, went over the whole establishment with her to show styles for the coming months. Underskirts were an intoxicating item that year. Martha had a moreen one that would do for herself, but Agnes must have taffeta. Substitutes for taffeta were plainly distinguishable by an inferior rustle. She was too devoted a mother to permit her child to visit Berkeley wearing percaline, and so she selected silk.

Qualms attacked her at home when she added up the sales slips that had been wrapped in parcels. To subdue them she got her books and read passages like, " Be not afraid," and " Spirit, not matter, being the source of supply." When fear was laid she pinned the slips together and secreted them safe from any nosings on Henry's part.

Sewing on the materials she had bought was a renascence for Martha. She mellowed to such an extent that she was even friendly with Henry at times. When the Daylight displayed more bargains, added she to the reserve stock of stuffs accumulating upstairs, complimenting herself on having made a complete demonstration over fear.

Nevertheless as the first of the month approached, she thought it best to get up for breakfast and meet the postman

when he arrived. Business methods being what they were in El Stancias, bills might be sent any time. Watching the door up to the second of the month she was delinquent on the third and got caught in an accident. Bargaining with a vegetable man in the back yard, she heard the warning whistle and only reached the door as the postman handed an envelope to Henry.

" I'll take that," she said, and snatched.

Henry hadn't read the address. His eyes had riveted on the name printed on the upper left hand corner.

" We're not dealing there, are we ? " he asked. " After running me out of business, as you might say, we're not——"

Martha had an inspiration.

" A letter from a store doesn't mean you deal there," she said. " Advertising is done by mail nowadays. If you'd spend a little extra postage yourself——"

" If it's for me, give it here," Henry insisted. " I've got a right to my own mail yet, I guess."

" It's for me," Martha lied.

Henry left with his jaw set as it always was when indignation and timidity wrestled within him.

Martha slid the envelope under a table cover.

" For heaven's sake, what ails you ? " she snapped at Agnes, who stood paralysed in the dining-room doorway. " Hurry—you'll be late to school." She kissed her with a small, tight mouth.

Agnes failed to move. She was trying to invent something that would please her mother. Trouble was brewing over bills. She'd heard the altercation in the hall. All those things for the party had to be paid for—and more besides. She didn't see how she was going to stand a first of the month now, with all that about Eddie for ever on her mind. It had been enough, without bill troubles, to see her mother sewing straight ahead, paying no attention to protests, making clothes for a visit that could never possibly occur. If only something that would please Martha could be thought up. If only Martha didn't have to be left alone all day to

think and think and get madder and madder at Papa as she thought. That was what she would do—get madder and madder, until when night came——

"Are you going to school as I say?" Martha asked ominously. "Or are you going to hang around until I lose my patience?"

Agnes leaped at the lesser of the two evils presented. But all through the morning session her mind milled around and around the terrifying thing that was happening at home. Trying to eat her lunch at noon, she coughed on crumbs in her throat, and emptied her box in the trash basket. She could still feel her mother's tight, hard kiss on her mouth. It was as though it had crystallised there. Something must be done to loosen the rigidity of those lips before evening came and Papa was home from the store. Febrile plans for loosening the lips, for making them broader and sweeter, took form in her mind all afternoon, and then evaporated before she could devise any way of putting them into operation.

She spent the afternoon stumbling over her lessons, getting low marks, even arousing titters when she tried to answer questions that had not been heard.

Pelting home after school, a dozen useless devices for diverting and amusing her mother whirled in her mind. None of them was any good, but something had to be tried. Pausing at the back gate to organise herself, she found she couldn't, and plunged on into the house.

Martha sat sternly with her books in her own room. That of itself was a bad sign. She wore the thorn-crowned expression of a martyr.

"It's—the heavenliest—day!" Agnes gave a wretched imitation of gay and care-free excitement. All the plans she had thought up were gone, and she had to make a new one as she went along. "I'll tell you what! Let's pack up supper like a picnic and go out to Meachem's Dam on the street-car to eat. Shall we? I can run down and tell Papa now, so he can come too."

The look Martha gave her said all too plainly that she saw herself picnicking at Meachem's Dam—eating on the grass with Henry Barnet ! She shut her books and went to the sewing machine without a word. Agnes crept downstairs, holding to the banister when it seemed that she must fall.

Dinner was the only hope now. A good dinner, got without calling for help, might help. Projecting a culinary masterpiece she began it as soon as her practising was done. She couldn't separate the eggs for the dessert in which her hope lay. The shells broke wrong and the yellow ran into the white.

At a few minutes past six the front door clicked. Shutting the oven in which potatoes were baking, Agnes propped herself with her hands on the floor. Her father climbed one flight of stairs, then another. If he only hadn't gone to his own room first. It was hot up there, so close to the shingles. She started to follow him and say something—pat his cheeks, and kiss him. In the hall she remembered that her mother would hear her, and came back.

Dinner was all that could possibly help now. Taking potatoes from the oven, she punched them soft, opened the skins and put butter inside. The steak was cooking, just as her mother liked it, in a dry pan. While the butter was melting in the potatoes, she got some roses from the climber on the back porch and put them on the table. Then she called upstairs.

For a time it looked as though the dinner had worked. Her father discovered the puffiness of the potatoes and smiled at Agnes over them. She pulled her own mouth into a kind of answering smile.

After dessert Martha went to the living-room, leaving the dishes for Agnes. Agnes disregarded the dishes and followed. She couldn't leave the two alone together. Martha raised inquiring eyebrows.

" I've got home work to do," Agnes lied.

" Then stack the plates in the sink at least." Martha's martyr look intensified. " You'll have time for that."

Agnes eyes and ears stayed in the living-room. Henry Barnet sat at the centre table with a newspaper, but he wasn't reading. His thoughts behind the screen of sheets were almost audible. Agnes slammed the dishes in the sink, got her *Latin Composition* and sat by her father. He reached for her pencil, sharpened the point, and handed it back.

Martha sat straight and motionless in a rocking-chair. Her eyes were closed. Henry shifted, and doubled his paper back.

" Can you see there ? " he asked Agnes.

" Yes."

Martha opened her eyes.

" Take your study to your room, Agnes," she said. " I have something to talk over with your father."

The order was not to be disobeyed. Martha watched with threatening forbearance as papers and books were gathered slowly.

" There's no place to write up there." Agnes made a last stand.

" Do as I say."

Upstairs, Agnes bumped and jerked like an automaton. She had got her clothes off before she remembered she had been sent away to study, not to sleep. But neither sleep nor study was possible. Barefoot, chilly in white cambric, she crept down to the landing in the hall. Terrific, jarring silence came from the room below. Nothing had happened yet. Perhaps nothing would happen.

Trickles of hope began to filter through her veins. A segment of light came through the living-room door and made a geometry problem on the wall back of the hat-rack. If you bisected it——

Her father's paper moved and blotted out the problem. It moved again and the problem returned. He had put his paper down. There was a shadow of Martha crossing the light, taking something from hiding under the table cover.

" This is addressed to you," she said.

" It was a bill, then," Henry mumbled. " I knew it."

" Naturally it's a bill. Do you think I can run a house and dress a girl without contracting bills ? If you'd give me cash, as other men do their wives——"

" I gave you cash when I had it."

" Now don't start that. I've heard it all before."

" It's as true as it was before."

" Henry, I've been giving considerable thought and work to your problem." Martha was endeavouring to hold herself in. " And I see it all clearly. You'll never rid yourself of the poverty thought as long as you hold on to it the way you do. You've got to launch out. God is our supply, but if we shut ourselves away from him with doubt and fear——"

" Let's not go into that now, Mother. We look at things different." He was trying to hold himself in.

" You're not seeing anything any way. If you did, you'd get somewhere. I tell you, Henry, you'll never climb out of the rut you're in until you're jolted out."

" Running up bills on me is your idea of jolting me out, I suppose. And at the Daylight Store ! Isn't it enough that they've——"

" I'm not one to bite my nose off to spite my face," said Martha. " If it's to my advantage to trade at the Daylight, I do it."

Henry was opening the envelope.

" My Lord ! " he said.

" You've got to be jolted. It's the only way, and I——"

" You got that notion out of those everlasting books of yours, I suppose. I don't see where you found it. I haven't gone into them very deep, I admit, but what I have read seems to me to put in a word now and then for mercy."

" Don't try to explain my religion to me. If you'd study——"

" Can't. Somebody has to get breakfast." He was capable of meanness when pressed.

" So—that's what's rankling ! Your idea of a wife then, is that she should——"

"Has Agnes gone to bed?" Henry interrupted.

"Didn't you hear me tell her to go to her room?"

"Yes. But has she?"

"Certainly she has, if I told her to."

"All right then, we'll get down to brass tacks. I can't meet this bill. What are you going to do about that? If you're so sure where your supply comes from, now's the time to haul a little of it down. I, in my darkness, can't do it, but I'd be tickled to death to see you perform. You might get some for me, while you're at it. There are bills I could discount for the store."

"Don't talk store to me!" The voice rose perilously. "What's that fiddling little place ever done for me, that I should take the clothes from my child's back to discount its notes? If you didn't crawl off on a side street, and buy measly dribbles of goods, and wait on customers yourself, and wash your own windows and sweep your own floors, creditors wouldn't care whether you met your obligations on the spot or not. Look at other men! Gus Michelson's probably borrowed more money than you ever heard of to put up that new insurance building. Does he go nagging his family to save a cent here and a cent there, to pay it off? Not with a wife like Leila, he doesn't. When he wants money he goes to the bank and gets it. That's because he's a man and not a worm. If you——"

"What did you call me, Martha?" Henry asked strangely.

"I didn't call you anything. I said Gus Michelson was a man, not a worm."

"Don't let me ever hear anything like that out of you again."

"You'll hear what I have to say. My soul is my own. I'm through keeping my mouth shut——"

"You've never kept your mouth shut. Don't let that worry you."

"I've pinched and saved and scraped——"

"Now, Mama, listen to me. I work too. I'm my own

manager and book-keeper and clerk. I sweep my floor, as you say. I stay and lock up at night, and am down to open up in the morning. But men who come in to sell me goods, and old customers who hunt me up, respect me. It's only here at home that I'm despised. Can you understand what being despised at home does to a man? Instead of coming from the discouragements of business to a place where I can get my pins under me again, I leave this place mornings feeling that no matter how bad trade is, I'm a man in my store, even if I'm not at home."

"I told you once I didn't want to hear about that store. If you'd sell out, and get a job that was your size, with regular pay coming in, no matter how small——"

"I won't sell out. I've got to have a place to go and get my head up again, after it's been whacked down here."

"Gus Michelson——"

"What's got Gus Michelson on your brain all of a sudden? All right, we'll talk about him and I'll remind you of something you seem to have forgotten. I was as big a man as Gus once. But Gus got a wife that helped——"

"Helped! Leila!" Stung by implied comparison Martha reverted to recollections she had decided to let die. "That frizzy-headed prostitute——"

"Be careful what you say, Martha."

"If a woman isn't a prostitute when she has a baby seven months after she's married, what is she?"

"She may be a woman who knows something about love, and about men."

"Don't be obscene."

"I'm not obscene. I'm trying to tell you something. You know more of what's not so, and less of what is, than anybody that ever lived. You're not a woman. You're a lot of crazy notions snapped together with a rubber band you picked up and called religion. I've been faithful to you—though why, in God's name, I don't know——"

"If being faithful is a hardship to you——"

"Faithful! I know there's just one thing as bad to you

as faithlessness, and that's what faithfulness means. Why in the name of heaven I haven't gone out and taken what I could find—what any man can find—I don't know. Do you realise what you're trying to make of me? One of those crack-voiced half and halfs——"

"Oh—— Oh!" Her chair screeched on the floor as she pushed it back, and the sound that came from her sonorous throat was as alarming as a whistle from a 'cello. "That's the last I'll ever take from you. I'm going away. I can't go on living——"

"How can you go away? Don't think I haven't thought of that. I've wanted to do it myself. But there's Agnes."

"Agnes is mine. She goes with me. I'll go to the sister who has plenty, and who owes me——"

"Your sister doesn't owe you a thing. And you can't take Agnes."

"Why not? She's mine. I've gone through——"

"I've gone through a little for Agnes myself."

"You—who won't even pay bills for her! Oh—oh!" the whistle recurred. It broke into laughter and ended in sobs.

On the landing Agnes heard the quick scuffle of her father's feet. His chair fell with a crash. She lurched downstairs and through the door.

"Take the lamp," Henry called to her. He was pushing the table away from the fallen body on the floor. Agnes got the swaying kerosene burner and set it on the mantel. "Bring a wet towel," Henry ordered. She got a napkin from the dinner table and the dipper from the kitchen. Water slopped as she ran. "Wet that——" Henry knew the routine of restoratives. "Put it on her head——"

He and Agnes tried to lift Martha to the couch. Her muscles froze. It was as though she glued herself to the floor. Screaming, laughing, resisting, she opposed their efforts. Her head was thrown back, and her open mouth was blue. Blue blotches stained her cheeks. Her hands tore at the collar of her dress. When they got entangled with

the napkin, she struck it off. It flew wide and slapped a dark stain on the wall.

"Mama—drink this—drink!" Agnes was over her. Martha raised glazed eyes to the shaking child, drank, and let water drain from her mouth over her chin.

"He's killed me!" Her rigour slackened. Sitting up, she laboured for breath. "After all these years—he's killed me——"

They got her to the couch. Agnes knelt, her ashy face against the discoloured one.

Henry counted his wife's pulse with white lips. It must be apoplexy. No pulse but the pulse of death could beat so hard. Once she had been love and life to him. Once she had set the blood ripping through his veins. She had brought him splendid gifts, and he had destroyed them. He had failed, and destroyed them. Nature had formed her for success, and he had failed.

"Martha——" he pleaded, "get well—and I'll never speak so to you again. There's nothing to worry about. I'll find a way around and pay the bill, and never say another word. If you want to go away for a little rest—if you want to visit Lettie——"

"I want to go away!" Martha moaned brokenly as, half borne, half walking she came to her room. "I'm so tired—I've tried so long and now I'm tired. If I can go to Lettie for a little while—and rest—I'll come back and take up my load again——"

Wanting to be alone and think of going to Lettie, she helped Agnes undo firm buttons and unclasp the steel and buckram of corsets.

"Lettie needs me——" she sighed as the stays fell off. "My little sister needs me. I'll leave Agnes here—and come back——"

Her mind was busy. The time had come to launch out for herself. She had stood wrangling over bills and the pressure of dependence as long as mortal woman could. In San Francisco Lettie attended a large church that

sponsored regular practitioners who made good livings for themselves helping others with their problems. No one was more fitted for such work than she, Martha. With a footing gained, she could take Agnes away from El Stancias—away from the Michelson boy whom she had never liked anyway. She could make a life for herself and Agnes——

Turning the sheet back from her mother's face, Agnes bent forward. Martha closed her eyes and breathed deeply, convincingly. Cold in her cambric gown the child closed the bedroom door and went down to her father. He stood at a window, staring against the blank wall of night.

" Good night," she whispered.

He turned and kissed her forehead and both her eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII

When Martha went to Lettie, the two left at home should have repined. They should have remembered why they were alone, and what the wife and mother had suffered before she finally succumbed and had to leave to gain strength to go on. They did remember. But for all that, a kind of tranquil, easy happiness insinuated itself into the life they lived together. They smiled across their plates one night, and after that gaiety, quiet but pervasive, came and refused to leave.

Agnes was to blame. She'd hurried to market after school and home to get dinner. Martha had left the house immaculate. She had worked to the last minute before leaving. She had said at the station that she stopped working only in time to dress.

Just the same, Agnes dusted the spotless house, because her father liked things bright. Then she cooked beets with butter, and fried potatoes and steak. Arranging the beets on a plate she thought they were the colour of Black Prince roses. Dessert was late strawberries.

When Henry came home, he had a small pasteboard bucket in a bag. It was ice cream !

They hurried through the regular food to have the ice cream on their berries before it melted.

" Good ! " Agnes said, and it was then they smiled. " I bet you got it at the Greek's."

" It's only a little out of the way to walk by there," Henry said.

When they had eaten their helpings, Henry brought the paper bucket from the kitchen and poured a melted residue equally upon both their plates.

" They've put electric lights around the Court House dome," he said. " It ought to be a fine sight when they turn them on for the first time to-night."

" Let's go see ! " Agnes exclaimed.

" Shall we ? " Henry loved his town. " If I help with the dishes we can get there in time to walk around a little first. There ought to be a crowd."

" Only plates and silver to do." Agnes jumped up. " I washed pots and pans as I went along."

Her father was nice to have helping. There was a tune all his own, which she hadn't heard him whistle for years. It was a jigging sort of tune. When he started it, Agnes joined in. Whistling a badly off-key duet they finished the dishes and got their hats.

In deference to conventions Henry subdued his whistle on the street. But the jigging tune ran through his steps. Agnes put her arm through his as they walked around and met people and talked. It was like a celebration, the crowd was so big.

As soon as darkness came everybody stood still and looked up. The mayor touched a button on a kind of desk on the Court House steps, and the lights came on. They were incredible.

" Well, I swan ! " Henry's eyes went from the button to the dome. Just a touch, and then all that splendour.

The crowd thinned, but Agnes was loath to relinquish her fun.

" Let's go by way of your store and look at the window," she said.

Henry's arm tightened on hers.

" But there are more interesting stores around the square," he said.

" We can see them on the way."

Still Henry demurred.

" I should have rearranged the display this week," he said. " And there's no light inside. We'd have to do with the street lamp."

" Come on." Agnes pulled at him.

They rounded the Square slowly, and then turned up a darker way and came to his shop. Standing at the window they regarded cans of bronze paint, some colour cards, and a pasteboard picture of a woman shellacking parlour furniture into unbelievable radiance.

" You make things pretty," Agnes decided gravely. " But next time you do the window, why don't you put in some of those water-colours they use for tinting edges of paper flowers ? "

It was an era of artificial pumpkin blossoms and paper chrysanthemums.

" That's a good idea," said Henry. " I'll do it to-morrow.

At home they didn't go to bed right away, and Henry spoke of Eddie.

" Going to any more parties lately with the Michelson boy ? " he asked.

" No."

" Why not ? "

" I don't speak to him—hardly."

" Don't get notions in your head, Agnes," Henry said slowly. " Notions make most of the trouble there is. Don't you like young Eddie ? "

" I did—kind of——" Agnes was hot and cold, both at once.

" Then keep on liking him. Liking people is about all we get out of life."

They dropped the subject.

" It's been a nice evening," Agnes said.

Henry moved the table and lamp over by the couch. He had bought a Sacramento paper at the Square.

It was like that evening after evening, for a whole week. They whistled in the kitchen and had ice cream three times. Henry was more constant than inventive with surprises.

" Any letter from your mother ? " he always asked when he came in. The answer was yes or no, according to the day's mail. At the end of the week he was more explicit.

" What does she say about coming home ? " And then loyally : " It leaves a big hole in the house to have her gone."

" She doesn't say when to expect her," Agnes answered. " I guess it takes quite a while to rest up."

" She needs trips." Henry was genuinely regretful of the limitations binding Martha. " She's the kind that wants a change. We ought to remember that she's different from you and me."

" I know." Agnes spoke absently. She'd been wanting to ask about the bill for days, but didn't suppose she'd dare. Now all at once, it didn't seem particularly daring after all. " The Daylight Store ? " she asked. " What about the Daylight Store ? "

" All fixed up."

" But you said you needed your money at the store."

" First National accommodated me. A loan."

Agnes considered what had just happened. Money matters had been discussed at home, and no voices raised !

" Your idea for water-colours in the window was just the ticket." Henry spoke from the couch again. The calf-bound Byron from the attic reposed on his stomach. He had great affection for George Gordon, Lord Byron. He liked not only the contents of the volume, but the binding.

Once, when he was a bachelor, he'd started to get a library together. No books had been added for years, but he was tender with those he had. " I sold three outfits first crack out of the box," he continued, anent water-colours. " And calls come in right along. If you have any more ideas, trot them out."

" I will when I have."

Agnes had a book too. She'd stopped at the library in the hour she should have practised, and browsing around had come upon Mrs. Burnett's *Lady of Quality*. Propping it against the bread-box she'd read while she was getting dinner. When that book was finished, she was going to get the sequel—unless her mother returned too soon.

There was much in the book she'd rather not have Martha inquire about. As far as printed words went, they were like most printed words. But between them, engendered by them and rising through them, were shadows—foggy images resembling answers to the unformed questions which seemed always to be floating around inside oneself. Without rightly knowing what passion was or daring even to think the word, Agnes felt that there was passion in the book. Rising from Mrs. Burnett's guarded phrases and genteel allusions, a pillar erected itself in her understanding. It was a pillar of smoke, smoulderingly engraved with hieroglyphics to the effect that hidden things, subjects undiscussed and pushed away into corners of shame, were nevertheless common to the race. They were outlawed and dishonoured—but there.

Strangely, in reading of the Lady Clorinda's covered love, Agnes was not alarmed, but soothed and reassured.

When her eyes grew heavy she tucked the book under her arm to take away and read in the morning as she dressed.

" Good night," she said. But she didn't go. " I—I'm making up with Eddie. He seems glad."

" Shouldn't wonder."

" I'd heard things about him. But just the same he seems —well, I mean—the way he looks at you out of his eyes——"

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" It's the way folks look out of their eyes that counts."

" Good night," she said again.

" See you in the morning."

For all her sleepiness, she read another chapter in her room. After that she lay awake in the warm night, watching the progress of beautiful, unfathomable dreams across her ceiling.

CHAPTER XIX

By the end of a week in San Francisco, Martha's shattered energies were not only restored, but augmented. She felt that the time had come to begin helping Lettie.

Lettie's case was worse even than Martha had suspected. There is hope for those who realise their condition and suffer in it. But Lettie appeared neither to realise nor suffer. As far as Martha could see she was just a plump, amiable organism floating comfortably in the element supplied by Walter Morgan. A jelly-fish could not have been more pliable.

Returning from a meeting of Lettie's literary club one day, Martha undertook the work so plainly mapped out for her. The meeting had stimulated her. Two beautifully dressed and ample-bosomed women had read papers, one on " Art " and the other dealing with " Women of To-day."

Driving homeward in Lettie's buggy, she spoke.

" There is something I must say to you," she began.

Lettie nosed the horse up to a curb in front of a grocery store.

" Hold the lines a minute." She gathered her full skirts and got out. " I've got to have a case of beer put in the back. Walt's most out, and he likes it evenings."

Martha made mental comments about getting beer for that hulking collection of masculine appetites at home. She was so affronted when the grocery man came out and

hoisted a box into the back of the buggy that she couldn't go on with what she had intended to say to Lettie. She felt pilloried and degraded. Bottles rattled as the horse jogged on, and " Pabst " proclaimed itself in large scrolled letters at the rear, for all the world to read.

The beer had ruined a perfect opportunity. Walter arrived by street-car as Lettie drove up the runway of the barn. He laughed in huge appreciation of the clanking box of bottles. Martha switched down and went into the house. After unhitching, Walter came in, smelling of horse. Lettie went to change her dress. At dinner Walter asked how she and Mart had put in the day. Martha reminded him that her name was not Mart. Lettie told about the club meeting. Walter listened with relish to excerpts from " Women of To-day," and got boisterous about ladies who wanted to wear the pants. They finished dinner, and still laughing, Walter went out to play cards with some men.

Martha went to her room and brought her books down. The task before her was a hard one, and she needed fortifying. Clearing a stool of a loathsome ash-tray, she flung a cigar end into the fire-place, and opened her books before her.

Lettie felt uneasy. She had a premonition that Martha was going to read the lesson aloud. Getting a magazine and a box of chocolates she entrenched herself behind them. Martha saw, and bent further to her reading. When she had achieved the required courage, she spoke to her sister.

" Does Walter play cards every night ? " she asked.

" Oh, no." Danger of being read to having passed, Lettie took up her embroidery. It was a centrepiece. The design was cherries and ferns. The cherries were red and fat, padded high and round. By all rights Lettie should have begun at the scalloped border, but the cherries intrigued her.

" It just happened that way this week," she said, holding her work under the light. " Usually he does it only Wednesday and Saturday."

" Wednesday ? " disapprovingly. " I thought he went to church with you when you asked him."

" He says he does. He knows he's safe and I won't ask him. Sometimes, when we get up in time, I drag him out Sunday morning. Usually though we stay in bed late Sunday morning."

Martha was revolted by the picture of Lettie, late abed, with Walter Morgan.

" Do you keep up your music ? " she asked after a pause.

" Sometimes I play this new rag-time when we have a crowd in to dance."

" And I skimped and slaved to make you a music-teacher ! "

" But then Walter came along and saved me," Lettie chirped.

" Do you think a woman should put such confidence in a man that she neglects what would insure her independence if the time came she had to have it ? "

" I'll never have to give music-lessons."

" This house, I suppose, is in your name ? And some other property ? "

" Not a property. Walt needs all he can lay hands on sometimes to raise money for deals. It'd only waste time if he had to run out for me to sign papers."

" You'd better go back to your music, Lettie."

" Mercy me—why ? "

" If I'd had a profession, I wouldn't be where I am to-day."

" I didn't know you were anywhere, Martha."

" I'm not. But it isn't kind of you to mention it."

" You know what I mean. You've got a home and a husband—and Agnes."

" I have Agnes."

Lettie stitched. Martha covered her eyes.

" You're asleep, little sister." She took her hand down slowly. " You're drugged and drowsing in a purely material existence. Walter keeps you——"

" You talk like Walter'd set me up somewhere in what they call an establishment. Don't forget I'm married to Walter."

" If marriage isn't a spiritual unity, it's nothing."

" We get along fine."

" And why, little sister? Why? I could put a happier interpretation on your life if you had children—if you were dedicating yourself to the production of a new and better species."

" I love Walt ! " It came out pinched and startled. Old timidity before Martha was creeping up on Lettie. Behind every word said, the weighty personality of the older woman banged with remembered authority. Lettie felt the foundations of her home and happiness shivering under the attack of a returning despotism.

" I love Walt ! " she squeaked weakly again. " I love him."

" Love ! " Martha rose, her whole estimate of love translating itself into action as she swept from the room.

Alone, Lettie tried to embroider fat cherries. She couldn't. Her hands shook. Martha whom she thought she had escaped, was asserting supremacy again. Forgotten habits of obedience presented themselves for re-adoption. What Martha said had to be law. Right or wrong, it had to be law. Within earshot or out of it, Martha's subjects were subjects, and might as well give up.

The light was still burning in the standing lamp, and the cherry centrepiece lay in a tangle of rosy silk on the carpet when Walter came home at two o'clock. He stooped over the litter. It wasn't like Lettie—leaving her pretty things to be stepped on. Something had been going on. He'd been as decent as he could be to Martha—kept out of her way for a week. But if she started that old stuff of hers with Lettie, he'd have to forget that he was a gentleman.

Stooping to the centrepiece he tried to fold it. The wispy silk clung to his fingers. Why, in the name of Sam Scratch,

did Martha have to come and bless them with a visit? He hadn't invited her, and he'd bet his night's winnings Lettie hadn't either. Twelve silver dollars weighted his pockets. Usually he and Let spent poker money on dinner and a show. But he'd be damned if he was going to take Martha to dinner, or sit next to her in a theatre. Let could buy matinee tickets and soda-water with the loot.

Shoving the dollars into the centrepiece, he made the rounds to see if doors and windows were locked. He liked the prowling familiar job. It made him one again with the quiet corners of his home. Sleepy, clean darkness welcomed him, and cast out the intruder. Beginning at the back he worked forward through pantry and kitchen and came to the living-room. There he stopped and with a curtain drawn back breathed deeply of the salty medicined air that came through the crevices of a window. Gosh, but the bay was a picture at night, he thought, sparkling and cutting up in the wind, with a busy little tug bringing a sleepy four-master in through the Gate. He and Lettie had luck, to live in a place like that. People with such luck as theirs ought to rely on it and trust it to pull them out of tight places. Martha had come and upset their life together, but their luck would hold and after a while she would go and they would forget her again, as they had so long forgotten her. His luck and his Lettie were the best assurances Walter had ever had of God. After a period of doubt and turmoil, his faith in them returned. Dropping the curtain he went to bed, holding fast to his confidence in Lettie and luck.

CHAPTER XX

In some ways Martha appreciated the house more than either Walter or Lettie. It contained every comfort. The Japanese brought breakfast to her room when she rang. There was a wash-stand with running water in her room,

and no male appliances for shaving or scouring off store grime on the shelf above. As separate bathrooms for guests were not then prevalent, she did not miss that luxury.

Following her evening session with Lettie, she awoke fully alive to the felicities surrounding her. Martha's nerves were of the invaluable variety that could be switched on and off at will. When emotion was opportune, she could be emotional with the best of them. When she wanted to sleep, she slept. Having slept well during the night, she awoke mightily refreshed, and now, dressed and ready for the day, sat with her back to a window overlooking the bay as she ate her breakfast, and considered ways and means of liberating her sister from the bondage of the flesh represented by Walter.

First of all Lettie must see that there was no more fatal folly than trusting blindly in a man. Men were all alike. One didn't have to live long under the same roof with Walter Morgan to find him out. He was guilty of red hair, a voice more powerful than Martha's, and poker at night. In all probability his card-parties wound up with Dutch suppers and beer. One thing led to another.

Lettie must get the house in her own name, take up her music again, and qualify for independence.

Martha was animated by the most primitive instinct of that most female organism, the working bee. Once the male of the species had fulfilled a purpose, her impulse was to destroy him. But she lacked the moral directness of the straightforward insect. She had to coat ruthless designs with sanctimonious names and pious significances. And so, over a powerful subconscious urge to nullify Walter Morgan in his own house, she spread a fine outward intention of purifying him, and reclaiming his offensive masculinity from its essential animality.

Hitting upon the unctuous phrase of reclaiming her brother-in-law from animality, Martha was seized with zeal, and finished her breakfast in a welter of self-approval.

Remembering that souls were brought from the mire

slowly, she saw that her occupancy of the room with every convenience, and her deserved rest under the ministrations of the Japanese servant might be indefinitely protracted. Working Walter's salvation, she would have ample time to look into the matter of connecting herself with the San Francisco church, and even of taking preparatory steps towards establishing herself in the city as one of a devoted band dedicated to the noble profession of helping others with their problems.

Great patience came to her. Going downstairs she was tolerant of the squirrel-like tactics for keeping out of the way, employed by Lettie. She was even augustly winsome to Walter when he came home for dinner. She made a remark when he left for the evening.

The new order maintained itself in perfect equilibrium until Sunday morning, when, instead of ringing for the Japanese and a tray, she arrayed herself fully and stiffly for church, and descended to breakfast.

Walter was astonished, and none too pleased. He'd counted on a visit with Lettie. He'd thought they'd hitch up and drive to the Trocadero. Let always talked best out driving. She'd been distraught for days, and he wanted to get at what was eating her.

Martha took her place at table with ominous serenity. Her eyes rested on Walter's clothes. They were what he wore to rub down the horse.

" It's ten fifteen," she said, as a saint might have announced the imminence of glory.

" So ? " Walter set The Yellow Kid sheet of the *Examiner* against the sugar bowl.

" Shall we catch the twenty to eleven car for church ? "

" Go ahead," Walter mumbled. " I guess I'll hop around and pick up Tom Wiggins for the day."

" Do you take Mr. Wiggins to church ? "

" No. He takes me fishing."

Martha's serenity cracked. Small lines played around her mouth.

" If Walter can spare the sugar bowl," she said to her sister, " I'd like a lump in my coffee."

Walter removed the comic to a jar of jam.

Lettie squirmed.

" I—I don't believe I'll go to church this morning," she stammered. " You know the way, Martha. You—you can get there alone, can't you ? "

" If I have to go alone, I can." Martha resumed her patience. " It's not my purpose to miss church."

" Good for you ! " Focusing from his whole person, Walter's approval became a grin. Hitching his belt tight, he got up and took a step or two towards the back door. " Got to look the nag over," he mumbled. And then by way of jollity : " Pray for Let and me while you're at it, Mart."

" I will." Martha rose also. Walter and Lettie waited apprehensively until she was gone. Then Walter came back from the door and passed his cup for Lettie to refill.

" What's she shooting at now ? " he asked in as near a murmur as he could achieve.

" She thinks we ought to go to church."

" How long does she figure on honouring us ? "

" I shouldn't think for long. She's got affairs of her own to tend to at home."

" That won't worry her. She likes it here."

" We ought to be glad we can make it pleasant."

" But not so damned glad that we forget to look after ourselves."

" She—she spoke about your being out every night."

" Good. Tell her how I hang around like a tick to a setter pup when she's not here."

" I—I can't do that." Lettie broke her toast nervously. " Walt—did you put some money in my embroidery the other night ? "

" Sure. Graft still working. Winnings for you, losses for me."

It was a venerable joke, and like all venerable jokes between loving people, the better for age. But Lettie

couldn't laugh. The hard rap of the front door as Martha departed, reverberated through her disturbingly. Martha disapproved her defection from church. Martha had tended her when she was young, clothed and fed her. She owed loyalty to Martha. One Sunday stolen from Walt was such a little thing.

" I was thinking——" She moved the coffee pot on the tile restlessly. " After all—I'd better go with Martha. She —went early. I can still catch the car."

" None of that." Walter grabbed her skirt as she started.

" Let go, Walt ! " She brushed hysterically at his restraining hand. " I've got to go—Ouch ! "

With a practised hand Walter had whirled her around and planted a smart clip on a tempting portion of her anatomy. That too was an old joke. Usually she laughed, rubbed the chastened spot, and made a demurely naughty gesture which precipitated flight, capture, and general rough-house. Now she backed away, as though his touch had been infamy.

" Don't," she whispered. " Don't do that. I've got to go. She thinks—I've got to go."

" Say, look here——" Walter began, following as she hastened for her hat and coat.

" You ought to come too," she flung back, running for the car. Walter trailed as far as the yard, rubbing his bare red head in bewilderment. What was the matter with Lettie ? What the hell——

CHAPTER XXI

Martha felt she was making progress in San Francisco. She had spoken at the testimonial meeting on Wednesday, and afterward a number of people had introduced themselves and thanked her for her message of encouragement and cheer. When she and Lettie left at the close of Sunday service, others made themselves known.

They were interested in what she had said of the movement in El Stancias.

"It's splendid to know that the work is going on," they said.

" We do what we can," Martha replied. " The field is harder to plough in a small community."

" You should be here, with us." It was the blithe, unthinking rejoinder of typical San Franciscans, but Martha took it to heart.

Half-way home on the street-car that Sunday, she turned to Lettie.

" Wasn't it nice they remembered me ? " she remarked.

" You have a strong personality, and your voice carries," Lettie replied. She was wretched. Walter's day was spoiled. Martha had ignored her on the trip to town and up to now on the way home.

The tribute deepened Martha's colour, and opened the flood-gates of intimacy with Lettie again.

" People do seem to feel me when I'm with them," she said. " El Stancias is a poor place to be, however. If, as you say, I had a wider field——"

Lettie hadn't said anything about Martha's having a wider field, but she let the mistake pass. She was busy hoping that Walter had found Wiggins and gone fishing. It would be horrible to arrive home and find Walter as she had left him. He might touch her—slap her as he had done that morning—and before Martha——

From the car-stop she saw the barn door open, and Walter sluicing the buggy with the hose. He didn't look up as she and Martha approached. He didn't come in early enough to change his clothes for dinner.

Martha elected not to observe his spattered flannel shirt at table. She made small talk about weather conditions as a prelude to more portentous enunciations.

" There is a wide field here for healing work," she said. Field was a word that had rooted itself in her mind.

" Umph," came from Walter.

Lettie plunged into the threatened breach.

" I think the horse needs new shoes, Walter," she said in a small weak squeak. " She slipped on the pavement yesterday."

" I'll look into it this afternoon," Walter growled. " Going to drive." He made no suggestion of desiring Lettie's company. " Better get started," he added, and, leaving most of the dinner untouched, went.

The remainder of the day was ghastly to Lettie. She spent it keeping out of the way while Martha read and thought with her hand over her eyes. Walter stayed out till all hours, and when he came in he neglected to reach over and kiss her in bed. She was a wreck next morning and didn't get up. Walter forgot to kiss her again.

Martha, however, was prey to no sickly anxieties. Dressed, even to her hat, she appeared at breakfast. Walter stared at the unexpected visitor, and down at his paper again. Martha chose to ignore his rudeness.

" Those who are in the healing work here—they have regular offices, I suppose ? " she asked.

" Umph ! There's a whole building alive with them."

Martha broke a muffin apart.

" Lettie suggested yesterday that I should be in a larger field," she said thoughtfully. " The more I consider it, the clearer it appears to me that the time has come to enter a wider field than El Stancias."

Walter pushed his plate aside. There was plenty he could say, but none of it came out. Folding his paper, he left. Martha took another muffin.

Lettie was in the hall as Walter passed through. She ran after him.

" I'll walk to the car with you," she said, " and run on to the grocery afterwards."

He walked so fast she had to skip every second step to keep up. He didn't kiss her as he swung on to the car. Standing hatless and desolate on the corner, she waited for him to wave from the platform. He unfolded his paper and began to read.

Lettie reached the grocery somehow and bought things—she didn't know what. Returning home she dumped a disintegrating load of small parcels on the kitchen table.

"You'll have to get what you want yourself," she said to the Japanese. "I couldn't remember——"

Martha snapped her hand-bag as Lettie came in.

"I'm going out," she said.

"But—I can't—and do you think——"

"I'll find my way around alone. There's an office building I want to look over—with a view of locating myself. Walter and I had a little chat this morning about my coming to the city to practise."

"Walter!" Lettie felt the earth crumble beneath her. "You mean—that Walter said——"

"Oh, he didn't say much. Just a helpful word or two. Men are cautious about advising women to launch out for themselves."

"But—you can't, Martha! The competition. The regulars—the old-timers—they'd be against you. They're that way—practitioners are—the regulars——"

"I'm a student. That is being regular, isn't it?"

"But—other things too. Your home—Henry——"

"Henry is happy in El Stancias. I am not. I can't be bound by Henry's limitations for ever. One greater than I left home and home ties to be about his Father's business."

The world teetered and swayed under Lettie. Martha was not only back as her mentor and guardian, but she was going to stay. Dazed, she watched from a window while the strong, graceful figure of her sister climbed the hill, to the corner and signalled the car. Then, suddenly dizziness left her, and resolve took its place. Martha wasn't going to stay! Whatever had to be done to prevent it, Martha wasn't going to stay. In a delirium of activity she flung a dust-coat on, flew to the barn, got out the horse, and backed her into the buggy.

Plunging down the runway like a toboggan, the buggy careened to the street, and bumped up hill to the avenue.

Grey mists folded up, layer on layer from the bay. Drops formed on the mare's ears, and Lettie's hair. Moisture filled her lungs and bulged thickly there.

The Morgan Real Estate and Investment Company occupied a large front room on the fifth floor of a red brick business block on Gerry Street. It boasted no typist or secretary. Walter wrote his letter in long hand, or called in a professional who either brought her machine or carried his work back to her own office. His domain was a roomy, square enclosure with a fire-place which the janitor operated on days when the fog shut out the sun. There were calendars and insurance placards on the walls. The furniture consisted of a flat-topped desk and a scattering of chairs.

Tying her horse to one of the rings in the pavement in front of the building, Lettie ascended in the wheezing elevator and opened Walter's door. He sat at the desk, and did not look up when his visitor entered. Feet apart, Lettie steadied herself and stooped to the level of his face.

" Look at me," she said. " Look up, I tell you."

" I'm busy," he said, and continued to write.

His pen dripped blots as she pushed the letter away.

" You're not too busy to listen to me." Lettie was shrewish. " Did you, or didn't you, tell Martha she ought to come to San Francisco and practise ? "

" You know damned well I didn't."

" Then she lied. Not the usual sort of lie. She thinks what she wants to think."

" Sit down." Walter's lowered face twitched as its hardened muscles limbered. Lettie hooked a foot around the leg of a chair and brought it to the desk.

" She thinks you want her here," she panted, leaning forward.

" The hell she does. What would I want her for ? Where'd she live ? With us ? "

" She hasn't thought that far yet. By evening she will know that the place for her is in our house. The next step will be that we want her and have offered her a home."

" Well, we don't and we won't. She's pre-empted the place already. I can't sit in my own parlour without feeling like Godamighty was keeping tabs to see where I dropped my ashes. I'm not quarrelling with your religion. It's yours and you can have it. Up to now I've thought it was pretty good."

" The trouble with religion is the way folks take it."

" The trouble with religion is that its easier to have than horse-sense. Now look here, Lettie—either you get that sister of yours and her books and her holiness out of the house, or I——"

" But I can't do it, Walt. The old thing's coming back on me. I feel her. I feel her thoughts about me—and you—and the way we live."

" You talk like she was a ghost."

" She is. I tell you, I feel her, even when she's in another room. In a little while, if she stays, she'll get me again. I'll be doing what she says."

" You poor kid ! " He looked at Lettie. His big hands crossed the desk to her small clammy ones. Scaling his voice down to the familiar mumbled roar of affection, he comforted her. " I know. You think she thinks you've come down to my level, and ought to be helped up again. Is that it ? "

" Yes."

" I'm no deacon, I know. But we've been happy. What is there to go by in judging what's to be done and what's not to be done, if you leave happiness out ? "

" Martha has other standards. And she talks to me, Walt. Even when I scramble out of the way so she can't talk—I know what she thinks. And not only that, but I get to feeling she's right. Our life together—the funny things we do—get suddenly ugly to me. She has a way of making people feel like that."

" I don't get it when she talks to me." Walter picked up a pencil and drummed. " Look here," he said at last, " this is serious. The old lady's got to go. Either you buck up and put it to her nicely—or I'll bust out."

" I guess—I guess you'd better bust out," Lettie said.

" Just as you say." Walter put the pencil down. " Naturally I'd like to maintain decent relations with my wife's family——"

" If she doesn't go, Walter, we'll find ourselves in trouble with each other. I'll change. I know. Already she wants me to get the house in my own name ; and when she talks about it, it seems the only safe thing to do."

" Good God, Lettie ! If you want the house you can have it—with the barn thrown in."

" I don't want it. But Martha lost her house—and when she talks I feel I am going to lose mine, too, unless I take measures. She's strong. She's stronger than I am—stronger than you are—stronger than all the rest of the world put together."

" Now about the house—— Maybe we ought—— I could get the papers fixed up to-day——"

" See ! I told you ! You're feeling her too—doing what she says, not because it's right—but because she says so. We can't do it—can't divide ourselves with the house. It might be right for others, but it would be wrong for us. It would be doing what she said. And starting that way we'd go on doing what she said. I know. I've been through it. She won't stop with the house. She wants me to go ahead with my music—get ready to teach when I leave you——"

Walter studied the blue, drenched eyes upraised to him.

" She's going back where she belongs to-day," he said.

He closed his office and went home early that afternoon. In the hall he encountered the Japanese with a glass of water on a tray.

" Hi ! " he bellowed. " where you going with that ? "

" Old lady just come back." The Oriental grinned fraternally at his boss.

" Hasn't she got a spigot in her room ? "

" Plenty spigot. No ice. All time ring for ice."

" Give me that glass. You run mix me a drink to have when I come down. Sabe ? Drink. Make it stiff."

The boy grinned once more and went about the congenial job of waiting on the head of the house.

Martha started a surprised question at Walter when he entered her room. She was resting after a day in town. Back to the window, she had drawn a stool to her chair and put her feet up.

" Good afternoon." She removed her feet from the stool. " I didn't hear you knock."

Walter set the glass on the marble rim of the wash-stand.

" What's this I hear about your new plans ? " he demanded.

" Not exactly new plans, Walter. They have been in the back of my head for a long time. My little talks with you and Lettie brought them out."

" I didn't know we'd had little talks."

Martha remained outwardly bland. But underneath she was beginning to boil. The temptation to hysterics was presenting itself.

Unperceptive as he was, Walter got a warning and glanced at the ice-water on the stand to make sure he could reach it in an emergency.

" We haven't had any talks before," he said, " but we're going to have one now."

" Won't you sit down ? "

" No. I came to talk, and I talk best on my feet."

" Walter, you're behaving so queerly that I think I must ask you to leave my room."

" And I think I must ask you to leave my house."

The pupils of Martha's eyes stretched.

" I'm Lettie's sister——"

" Nobody'd suspect it," Walter cut her off. " Now look here, sister-in-law, if you've made any arrangements to come to San Francisco and open shop, you can cancel them. There's a train up-country to-morrow and a hotel you can go to in the meantime."

Is

Temptation to tantrums grew. Martha's bosom alternately distended and collapsed.

" My freedom of action is my own," she said. " I'll do as I think right."

" As long as I've got lungs to holler with, you'll do as I think right."

" Walter——" the ligaments of her knees were contracting. Her throat was a sounding-board for cries. Walter loomed large in the sunset that filled the room. His voice was enormous. It might even overpower hers. Perhaps she had better appeal to him in a quiet way—bring Lettie into the argument. Lettie was Walter's weak spot.

" I've had a hard life," she began. " Now I see a way to get out of it. All I need is a little lift from you and Lettie. I sacrificed myself for Lettie through many long years. Now Lettie has a chance to repay me for what I did. It's not for myself that I'm chiefly thinking. There's Agnes. Once you said Agnes was pretty. You know, don't you, that there is just one thing for a pretty girl in a small town? I don't want her to marry—young—the first man that asks her. Already a boy in El Stancias is falling in love with her. She's a mere baby—but there's nothing for her at home except to fall in love and marry—young. She looks like Lettie. You wouldn't want a girl who looks like Lettie to marry simply because there was nothing else to do, and wreck her life. When I married Henry Barnet——"

" When you married Hank, he was the best bet in town—and look at him now ! " Walter had come close to going soft at mention of Agnes and Lettie, but reference to Henry stiffened him.

" If ever a wife——"

" Wife ? " Walter echoed. " Say, you don't know the meaning of the word ! Want to know what a wife is ? I'll tell you. She's the end of the partnership that stops at home, and when the other end comes yelping back with a string of cans tied to his tail, sneaks them off and pets him up till

he forgets, and starts out fresh again next day to beat the world."

Quiet appeal having resulted badly, Martha allowed a faint wail to escape. Walter didn't hear.

"I like Hank," he went on. "And if there was any other way, I wouldn't send you back to him. But I've got myself to think of——"

"Yourself!" Martha abandoned diplomacy. Tremors rippled through her flesh. "Always yourself! I haven't been in this house ten days without seeing through you, Walter Morgan. I know what you are, as well as though my little sister had confided in me. Your drunken parties, your gambling—your getting her off to yourself every time you come in the door. Lettie's told me enough——"

"Lettie hasn't told you a damned thing, and you know it. Now I ask you to pack your satchel and go."

The storm broke in full fury. Widening her throat Martha ripped out a scream. She lurched for the bed, and dropped before reaching it. Her fall detonated through the house. A mirror swung and bumped against the wall. Lettie heard, and tore up the stairs.

"Stay out!" Waving Lettie back, Walter took the water from the stand, advanced, and stood over Martha. She screamed again. Her eyes rolled and her lips were blue. Aiming from above he emptied the glass.

Strangling gurgles stopped the cries. Part of the ice was in Martha's mouth, part in her hair, part down her neck. Shocked to a sitting posture she stared incredulously at her assailant.

"You——!" she gasped. "You——! No one ever——"

Beyond the door Lettie whimpered. Walter stood where he was, holding the empty glass. Martha wiped water from her blouse. She was thinking unrelated and irrevelant thoughts, chiefly about her blouse. Would water stains come out? She disliked ice down her neck. The position on the floor was awkward, but getting up would be worse.

"I'm going away," she said, still sitting on the floor.

" No one ever—I'm going home—and I'll never set foot in your house again."

Not a muscle moved. She seemed to have come to perfect repose. Blood left her skin and turned it to porcelain. Her hands wiped thoughtfully at her blouse.

Walter felt like a brute. Glimmerings of the tragedy back of Martha's behaviour were granted him. Stooping to help her, he came back on his heels before an unwavering, almost childlike gaze.

" Lord," he said under his breath, " what a woman you'd have been if Hank had got the best of you at the start and kept it." Sensing the encroachments of weakness, he grabbed at his retreating purpose.

" About going," he said. " The Jap'll help you pack and see to your room at the Palace and your railroad ticket. They're on me, you understand—the room and the ticket."

He was perilously close to sympathy for Martha. What she'd said about having a hard life was true—truer than she knew. If Hank had got drunk once or twice and blacked her eye——

Needing Lettie's support he reached back and got her hand.

" Come downstairs." Lettie's teeth struck together at the ends of words. " I'll get dinner myself while the boy helps here. Come with me, Walter."

CHAPTER XXII

Through psychic intimations that trouble had passed and might be recalled by questions, Henry and Agnes refrained from comment on Martha's unannounced return. She brought a plaintive subdued atmosphere into the house, and the dinner hurriedly prepared in welcome was eaten to the accompaniment of something bordering on conversation.

Without a trace of humour she said that Walter seemed to be keeping his strength, and Lettie to have all she wanted.

She neglected to state that she had spent the night before at the Palace.

But she dwelt upon the hotel in her thoughts. Wiping out connotations of the visit, she remembered the room and bath to herself and long windows opening on a balcony over a court in which the most desirable aspects of life revolved. Coaches romped into the court, diners ate at its borders, jewels flashed, well-being reigned.

The aura of the Palace hung about her, and wistful regret for it. Wondering how her return could be brought about, she retired early and gave herself to dreams.

Next morning, however, somnolence was dispelled, and she went through her house like a whirlwind with broom and duster. Her mind was as active as her arms. Luxury, after long exile, had touched her at the Palace. She spun a dozen plans for getting out of the rut into which she had fallen and back, permanently, to at least an approximation of luxury.

She wondered if Gus Michelson wouldn't give Henry a job at a good salary. The insurance company was prospering. It was said that the new building on the Square was only a detail of Gus Michelson's plans. A trusted employee of the company might be sent over the state, his family accompanying him.

Pausing in work, Martha leaned on the handle of her carpet-sweeper to manufacture reasons why Gus should help Henry. Eddie came into them. Leila would oppose Eddie's interest in Agnes, but Gus would not. Gus was sentimental—in that single respect he resembled Henry. Eddie's interest was practically assured.

Agnes was pretty—more than pretty. Feature by feature her original prettiness had cast itself into the mould of beauty. Tall and fragile as she was, the lankiness of childhood had already gone. Cell had added itself to cell, corpuscle to corpuscle. There was a luscious quality in the thick brown hair and the colour that came and went over a face otherwise translucent. The blue eyes verged at times

towards purple. And there was no danger that Agnes would ever kill love by wit. There was lethargy about her, as though womanhood, freighting the long, light bones of a child with loveliness, safeguarded the burdened frame with a prolonged catalepsy of adolescence.

Eddie wouldn't lose interest. In four years, when he finished school, Agnes would be approaching twenty. If she didn't marry Eddie then she might marry another—possibly even less desirable than Eddie—as Lettie had done.

Though the purport of marriage for Agnes revolted Martha, she admitted that it was all there was for a girl in a hole like El Stancias. Music-teaching was a poor solution to a puzzle including Agnes' beauty. Marriage—with all its unfortunate synonyms—was the only answer.

Rolling the carpet-sweeper, Martha accepted the inevitable, and with characteristic resourcefulness proceeded to change it. Agnes would not sink into the slough that engulfed Lettie. She would live in the spirit. Marrying in the flesh, she would still live in the spirit. Agnes had always been her mother's child. Her mother's spiritual attainments should be passed on to her.

She failed to see any abnormality in the grim jest that was preparing for Eddie Michelson. Involved in details of the plan, and in foreshadowing life for Agnes, she all but forgot the original purpose of a job and a salary for Henry with which she had started out. She cleaned her house vigorously and well.

At the end of a week at home, however, faint prickings of anxiety bothered her. She'd neither seen nor heard of Eddie Michelson since her return. Boys were notoriously unreliable. Eddie was graduating in a few days, and might go away immediately thereafter. The Michelsons were always traipsing off.

Suggesting that Agnes should follow her, she took the blouse that she was making over to hide water stains down the front, and went into the back yard to sew one evening after dinner.

" It's almost time for school to close," she said as they sat together.

Agnes was watching a belated bee, which, greedy of passing spring, had stayed late among the yellow tassels of a linden tree. The heat of the day had been intense. Spots of colour burned in her cheeks, but her hands were languorous and hung lifelessly over the arms of her chair.

" Yes," Agnes turned her eyes but not her head. Behind her mother, sharp in the distance, looking as though they had been pinned up on the pickets of the fence, mountains were like blue paper boxes tumbled against the brass skirt board of the sky.

" I wonder if the Michelsons will be going away again, after Eddie graduates."

" I—I think so. Anyway—Eddie said they were. He said they were—going to Europe again."

" I see."

Martha waited. Agnes pulled her gaze from the mountains. Heavy with pollen, the bee had gone home at last.

" They—they only decided yesterday." Agnes wanted to talk about it, but for all that, talking of Eddie was hard. " Mr. Michelson has gone to New York, or some place, already."

" Oh."

Agnes' lax hands pulled at the corners of her handkerchief. There was something she wanted dreadfully to ask, but it meant so much she didn't quite dare.

" Eddie——" she stopped and pulled a blade of grass. " Eddie—wants me to come to dinner—at his house—some night before they go. He said next Friday."

" Eddie ? "

" He said his mother said he could ask me."

Martha couldn't resist the opportunity for a dig.

" It's very kind of Leila Michelson to remember us after all this time."

Agnes pulled another blade of grass.

" Don't feel that way. Please, Mama—don't feel like that."

" What did you tell Eddie ? "

" I said I'd ask if I could."

There was a pause. The sky had no skirt board now. It was thick grey silk, with mountains bowing away into it as though it were a curtain.

" We're not in any position, right now, to return favours to the Michelsons," Martha said.

Agnes' eyes sought her mother's, pleadingly, urgently.

" They wouldn't expect it. They wouldn't expect it at all. Please let me go, Mama. Please ! Asking a girl to dinner isn't anything that you'd have to pay back. Really and truly ! "

Martha deferred consent. Planning, and actually moving to put plans into effect, were entirely different processes.

" I suppose Eddie will pass his examinations all right, so he can go to Berkeley next fall," she said to gain time.

" Yes. He's awfully bright in school. Please, Mama—I'll never ask for anything again—only please, this time——"

" If you want to go to dinner with Leila Michelson, I don't see why you shouldn't." She had gathered fortitude to proceed. " Your clothes are all right."

" Oh, Mama—you're so good to me—— ! " Agnes was up and crushing the remodelled blouse to get into her mother's lap. " You're so sweet ! As though clothes made any difference. As though clothes——"

" Go back where you were." Martha laughed, kissed the hot cheeks, and pushing the child away, rescued the rumpled blouse.

" I can go then—really and truly ? You said I could——" The blue eyes were purple now. " Then can I go and press my dress ? Get up a little more fire and heat an iron and press my dress ? "

" For heaven's sake, run along. You're like a hornet around my ears." Martha laughed again and returned to her needle and the blouse. She could hear Agnes clattering through the house, running up and down, kindling the fire again, calling to her father, whistling a tune.

On the day following Martha met Belle Winters down town. They had barely bowed for years, but now they stopped and talked as though their last visit had been no longer than the day before. In the course of other remarks, Martha let fall that Agnes was going to the Michelsons for dinner. Belle chuckled in her old jolly way, and said if Martha thought that was news, she was mistaken. Eddie had been all over town on his bicycle announcing it. Martha chuckled too and said boys were like that, weren't they?

Boys were like that. Unconcerned by any comment he might arouse, Eddie excelled himself in calling attention to the fact that he was in pursuit of Agnes. Promptly at ten minutes to seven on Friday evening there was scraping and backing and whoa-ing in front of the Barnet house. Eddie had come in the full splendour of the Michelson carriage, with the coachman driving.

At nine and one half minutes before seven he was out of the carriage and ringing the door-bell. Martha answered.

"Brought the truck!" Eddie plumped into the hall. "Agnes ready? Speed's the word, as old Jim buttles too, and we wouldn't know our own soup if he hadn't had his thumb in it."

Martha stepped back. Why couldn't Eddie Michelson be what he stood for, and not his obnoxious self?

"Come in." She indicated the living-room, hoping he'd sit still there and behave. "I'll see if Agnes needs help."

Eddie didn't budge. Agnes was coming downstairs, and halting on the landing. Eddie's countenance dyed itself in a combination of radiances. He looked like a peculiarly galvanic puppy turned to stone by immersion in a bath of Tyrian red.

Gathering powers of propulsion on the landing, Agnes catapulted the rest of the way and came to an abrupt, breathless stop six inches from Eddie. She wore the blue cloak.

" Chuck that ! " Recovering customary violence, Eddie reached for the wrap. " Equator's slid up and snapped down along Main Street to-night. Hot ? Wow ! "

Martha administered the required rebuke.

" She'll not go out in evening dress with no wrap over it," she said.

" Why not ? " Eddie executed a flank movement and removed the cloak. " Anything the matter with her neck ? Let's see."

Agnes giggled and locked her hands under her hair at the back. Martha recovered the cloak and set it sternly in place. She was having trouble holding herself in.

" Don't be late," she said, and herded the pair out.

When the carriage grated and turned in the street, she stood behind the living-room curtains. It was eminently right that Agnes should be going back to the house with plate-glass windows in a carriage with a coachman. If only the boy—if only it weren't for the boy himself !

When Henry, at his chores on the back porch, saw the carriage depart, he came in.

" How is it I can't be told anything ? " he demanded.

" You must have known when she didn't eat with us, that she was going to some place."

" But you couldn't tell me, could you ? I supposed she had a headache—hot day and all."

" You can't stay here in your shirt-sleeves."

" I can if I want—but I don't want. I'm going to bed. Hope the roof hasn't baked to a crust up there."

But he did stay for a while—and in his shirt-sleeves.

" I'd like to have seen young Eddie," he said in a queer voice. " I'd like him to know I'm his father's friend."

" I guess his father has plenty of friends."

" You'd never think it—from the talk."

" Talk ? " She was quick with the question.

" Not a word of truth in it. Not a word of truth if he never comes back."

" Tell me what you mean ? What talk ? "

" About a grand jury. They say Gus got in too deep with the building and so on, and used insurance funds, and has skipped."

Shock upon shock crashed through Martha. It was as though the girders of the world gave way. For a stunned second she repudiated the significance of what Henry told her. Then conviction came, and riding high on conviction another emotion. The Michelsons were fallen ! The scarlet woman Leila lay under the heap of her own whorings ! Eddie need no longer be a factor in Barnet reckonings. He could be his own objectionable self—and no allowances made.

" As plain as day to me." Henry was erecting defences for his friend. " Gus found he needed more money, and went back east to raise it. Men with big deals on have to go back east."

Martha refused to listen to him.

" Put out the lights," she said, " and fix the latch for Agnes. I'm going up to read."

She almost ran. She must make plans—new plans—excluding the Michelsons.

Sitting with her books, trying to form new plans from the unplastic material of her surroundings and Agnes', she came upon a shattering recollection. Agnes had run down from the landing to meet Eddie ! She had giggled at his crudity, with colour spots high on her cheeks ! She had ridden off with him eagerly—with the Michelson boy who now stood for nothing but himself ! It might be that Agnes liked Eddie ! Lettie had liked Walter Morgan and ended by running off with him.

Martha came to her knees beside her bed. Long before, mere attitude had ceased to be a part of prayer for her. Now she bent her knees and clasped and wrung her hands.

" God—— ! " she whispered. " Don't—God—don't let Agnes——don't—don't—don't ! "

CHAPTER XXIII

As soon as he could see through the shimmer of bliss in his eyes, Eddie turned on the carriage seat and looked at his girl. She was his girl. If going to see his mother didn't make her that, what would ?

" My mother teased me," he said. " She made out she was going to invite a whole raft. I sat down on that. I wanted just you."

Colour deepened in Agnes' cheeks. She'd supposed all along she would be the only one invited, but Eddie mustn't know she'd supposed it.

" Eddie Michelson," she gasped. " Am I all that will be there ? "

" You bet your life you're all that will be there. It's serious—your coming to-night."

" Hush ! " she whispered and nodded. " The driver'll hear."

" He'll hear—and guess the rest. Won't you, Jim ? "

A fantastically delighted black face came around, and then disappeared again towards the horses.

" You're terrible ! " Agnes gasped.

" Jim's not the only one who's heard, either," Eddie exulted. " I called my mother's attention to the lay of the land."

" You didn't ! I mean—I don't know what you mean."

" Well, I know what I mean. And so does she."

" Eddie—you're perfectly awful ! "

" She's great, my mother is. You'll like her."

" But—it will be terrible—seeing her—if—if—Eddie, if she lets on—you've talked—I'll die. If she's going to let on—or make jokes—I'll get out of this carriage right now——"

" Like to see her get out, wouldn't we, Jim ? Got her in our power house, haven't we ? "

" Right, Mista Eddie. I'll whip up so's she cain't jump," came over a black-coated shoulder as the carriage lurched.

" Didn't I tell you ? " Eddie bumped back and laughed gleefully. " Jim's a friend of mine."

The horses slowed again, and the carriage resumed its rhythmic swaying.

" Don't be scared of my mother," Eddie urged soberly. " She's great. She knows what things are about."

Scouting along mulberry upholstery his hand pioneered a place for his arm across the back of the seat. Agnes screwed towards her corner. But her own hand covered by a fold of the cloak dropped to the seat.

" Things aren't about anything." She pretended she needed her hand to steady herself. " I don't know what they could be about."

" Don't you ? Fine ! I'll tell you. I'm crazy about you—daffy—sunk—done for." He touched the steadying hand. " I'm a kid, I know, and kids are supposed to get well of their troubles. But I won't. I'm *feenee*—as they say in the French——"

" Eddie—for goodness' sake ! " Her hand twisted and wriggled in his. He held it tight and hunched towards her.

" If I had the summer ahead of me here, it'd be different," he explained in a hugely audible rumble. " But I'm going away and when I come back there'll be school again down at Berkeley. We gotta straighten this out now—to-night. What ails me is that I'm in love with you. And I want it settled that when I come back from school and all —we'll get married."

" Oh—— ! " Agnes felt herself falling, miles and miles, through the carriage-seat. " Oh—— ! "

Eddie was so close he crowded her into her corner. She couldn't get her hand from his. The coachman could hear. People along the street could see.

" Let me out," she whispered distractedly. " Let me—— ! "

" But it's got to be settled." Eddie moved closer yet. " You've got to talk to my mother to-night. She's waiting to talk to you."

" Let me out of this carriage ! Let me out ! I'm going home ! I've got to——"

Jumping back at the threat, Eddie relaxed his grip on her hand, and substituted a gentle, patting slide up and down her arm under the cloak.

" There," he murmured. " There—there—there. I didn't mean to scare you—truly. I'm a dub. Don't cry—— Oh, my Lord—don't cry ! I didn't know. You're the first girl I've ever—never had any sisters and so I didn't——Oh, Agnes—sweetheart—honey—don't ! "

The heart-rending cry penetrated Agnes' terror. Turning under the cloak her fingers caught his and locked tight.

" But I can't talk to your mother ! " Tears that had smarted under her lids gathered and fell. " I'd die. I'd turn and run and never stop. I'd——"

" Don't cry. Oh, my Lord, if you knew how it hurts to see you cry."

" I can't help it. I'd hate her. If she said a word I'd run till I found a place to die——"

" Please--honey—please ! I'll do the dying. Look—I'll jump out and have Jim run over me. Shall I ? Oh—for gosh sakes ! Listen—she won't say anything. I promise. It's just that I'm going away—that I'm going away——"

Her hand was tight in his, tight, tight. But her face was blenched and her heart motionless.

" So much can happen." Gusto was gone from Eddie. His fingers clung as desperately as hers. They were two children, washed about and drowning in a sea of terrors. " You're so sweet. So much can happen when a girl's so sweet. I wanted—us to talk together—to my mother. Now I see——"

She could neither look at him nor speak. Shame at what he said ran over her, along nerves stinging with another charge than shame. Old Jim's head strained back. Careless of waiting soup at home, he pulled his horses to a walk. Chillun needed time. But loiter as he would they didn't seem to get down to settling their trouble. Regretfully he turned

in between the acacia trees and came under the wide shingled porch with which Leila Michelson had replaced the stony gloom of the earlier porte-cochère.

" Hello ! " A woman stood in the door. She was small and quick and nervous, with crisp reddish hair and a broad scarlet mouth. " Get down and come along." She spoke hurriedly, as though words were exciting, evanescent things. " I'll take Agnes up. You hurry, Eddie. Cook's waiting for Jim."

Frightened even of the green floating dress that blew back towards her, Agnes followed Leila Michelson upstairs and into a room where there were tables and brushes and mirrors and chairs.

" If you want a comb——" The green dress flew like wings and came back, " Here's one. No powder—with that skin. I've always powdered and rouged. Did you know that ? Rouged. On my lips. Listen to Eddie. He's running down already. What had I better do ? He can't have half washed—and he's too big to send back. Shall we go and see if he looks all right ? You've such a pretty dress. I'll run ahead and tell cook we're ready."

The green flying robe moved like blown leaves. Agnes was on the stairway, going down to meet Eddie alone—in his own house. She stopped, pretending her sash had to be fixed.

" Let me ! "

Eddie bounded.

She pushed him back, afraid he would touch her. And then, at her own touch, she knew suddenly that she wasn't afraid. They walked together, solemnly, down the steps, arm brushing arm. Scudding in from another room, Leila Michelson appeared. Her quick eyes flew to the children, and squinted tenderly.

" Come, you babies," she said. " Come on."

Her draperies made little sounds, flying towards the dining-room.

It was a remarkable, clamorous meal. Three people never made so much noise. Jim put in a word when he got

a chance. Eddie racketed. From the head of the table his mother gasped excited, rushing words. Agnes laughed. There was ice-cream, and cake with frosting heaped up. There was coffee at the last in wee cups with tiny tinkling spoons.

Away from the table Mrs. Michelson rouged her lips. She did it openly, with paste from a gold box on the piano. The box was filled with little boxes, and had a mirror in the top. Agnes had never seen rouge before. It must be bad to rouge. And yet it was beautiful. Mrs. Michelson opened her mouth and put paste on with the tip of a little finger. Open, her mouth was like cut, red fruit.

" Want to dance ? " She closed the box, patted its gold top, and slid on to the piano bench. She played as she spoke. The music was breathless—too lovely to keep back. Notes splashed like waterfalls let loose. They changed and whispered and said things. They made you think of night-time, and heavy fragrant trees, and pains of ecstasy in your limbs. Bad music it must be—bad as painted lips. Mama would never play that way. Mama——

Remembering her mother Agnes became a ramrod in Eddie's arms. He tried to hold her close, but she stiffened away. As soon as the music died, she took a basket of kodak pictures to a chair under a lamp. Eddie leaned down, exuding explanations. There were pictures of Yosemite and Niagara. There was one of Mr. Michelson, very large, in front of an Alp.

" Travel must be broadening." Agnes didn't know the remark was funny until Eddie guffawed that anything was broadening to his dad.

At the piano Mrs. Michelson played again. Mad, fierce joys ran through her fingers to the keys, and ended with a cry. She sighed up from the piano bench as though a wind had lifted her.

" I've work to do—you babies excuse me, will you ? I've some ribbons I'm working with—colours I keep thinking about——"

She hurried to the ribbons. Agnes wanted not to think

of them, but they kept unrolling before her—apricot colour, and ruby and tender leafy green. The ribbons and the music were identical. They said the same wordless things. Inexplicable warning signals fluttered up in Agnes.

Eddie came and stood in front of her chair.

" There's ice-cream left in the freezer," he said. " It's for us."

Agnes tumbled the snapshots into the basket. She knew what the warning signals said. She mustn't stay there with Eddie alone.

" I've got to go." Pushing back from Eddie, she rose.

" But it's early ! " He was stunned.

" I'll get my cloak ! "

" What in the world's wrong now ? She left so we——"

" I've got to go, I say."

" But look—the ice-cream ! It's to eat."

" I can't—I must—must——"

" Lookit—we'll go then. We'll get Jim to drive us around —up by Meachem's Dam——"

" No ! " There would be night at Meachem's Dam, and heavy perfumed trees.

All the radiance left Eddie's face.

" Very well," he said stiffly. " I'll get your cloak."

Martha was up when Agnes arrived. She opened the door and dismissed Eddie back to the carriage. Questions began at once. She asked them in the hall, and on the stairs and in Agnes' room.

" How did Mrs. Michelson act ? Where was Mr. Michelson ? Was he coming back before they went away ? "

" I don't know," Agnes answered absently. " I didn't ask."

" What did you talk about then ? " Martha persisted.

" I can't remember. Mrs. Michelson——" She was on the point of saying that Mrs. Michelson played the piano, but caught herself. She couldn't explain about the music.

" I'm glad you don't like her." Martha interpreted the catch in the child's breath as she chose. " I shouldn't have

allowed you to go. It's said she does things to her hair and paints her face. Rumours about the Michelsons are going around. I can't tell you until they're verified, but when the facts come out——"

Agnes was only half hearing. Getting into bed and pulling the sheet up did fairly well when one couldn't put one's fingers in one's ears.

Her mother went, and Agnes heard the music again, and saw long, whispering ribbons rolling out. There was sharp, exquisite agony in her arms and knees. The ribbons were apricot-coloured and ruby and green. They flowed and rustled.

Next morning something forgotten for a time, returned. Eddie was going away. Lightless chasms of loneliness yawned before her. Eddie had foreseen the loneliness and wanted an understanding to mitigate it. That was why he asked her to talk to his mother.

She hadn't talked, and now the chance was gone. But her own mother remained. Her own——

Between morning and noon, she gathered courage to go to the kitchen where Saturday baking was in progress.

" If a—a girl and a boy——" She rushed, lagged, and rushed again. " If—maybe they like each other—shouldn't they make sure——"

Martha cut a ring of dough and doubled it into a Parker House roll.

" At least one of them ought to make sure she isn't a fool," she said grimly.

It wasn't a happy answer, but Agnes had learned to agree with her adversary quickly.

" Yes," she stumbled. " That's—what I mean. Oughtn't she—maybe—to know what's being a fool and what isn't ? "

" Humph," came from Martha.

" I mean—like—well, when you were a girl——"

" When I was a girl," Martha jabbed the cutter down, " I got into what I couldn't get out of. Judge for yourself whether I was a fool."

Courage guttered in Agnes. Argument had concluded as it so frequently did with Papa as an object lesson.

Taking a strip of cheesecloth she worked languidly at dusting the front-room, keeping well away from windows and yard. Eddie wouldn't ride by that day. How could he, when he must despise her for not talking to his mother—or even to him?

When the living-room was done she attacked the dining-table and got down to do the legs. The table stood on a pedestal with yellow oak claws gripping the carpet. The top made a roof under which was a place to think unobserved. Eddie had said he wanted her—when he came from school—to marry—— It was a daring word to think, but she did it, and afterward another one—love.

Knowing it for a perilous enterprise, she nevertheless attempted once more to talk to her mother.

"Supposing—if——" She said from the shelter of the table top. "Supposing—if—maybe a girl—loves——"

Martha looked astonishment and disappointment through the kitchen door at the huddle under the table. "Love is all right when there's plenty to back it up," she said harshly. "When there isn't and there's nothing left when it's gone but hard work and ba——"

She didn't finish, but Agnes knew. First one fell in love, and then one got married, and afterwards love wasn't there—only a baby. It would be interesting to know why there was always a baby. Stella knew. She looked sideways at Maggie when physiology recitations reached certain points and switched abruptly to the colourful transformations worked by alcohol on livers.

No one, not your mother, or your teacher, or even your books dared to say why there was always a baby. You had to guess—remembering smeared scrawls on wash-room windows—scrawls that Miss Dommit couldn't scold about without looking like death. But Agnes should think if people wanted just love—and not babies particularly——

"For goodness' sakes, wake up," Martha said from the

kitchen. " This is Saturday—and the whole house to do."

Agnes scrambled guiltily from her retreat.

" If you're mooning about that Michelson calf," Martha resumed, " I may as well tell you it's time decent people began leaving everything that's Michelson alone."

Meanings penetrated only slowly through the clouds in which Agnes lived. It wasn't until after lunch, and the house was cleaned, and she had bathed and changed to a lavender gingham which Eddie liked, that her mother's warning look took on ominous purport to her. What had Mama meant? What? Of course she'd never liked boys, but there was more than dislike of boys in what she had said. Agnes wished she could ask what had been meant. But to ask would only start more veiled reverberations through the house.

" You go up and read or sew," she said finally. " I'll study for Monday, and get dinner when it's time."

She didn't study. As soon as the sewing machine took up its buzzing tune of industry, she pushed her books away and sat, taut and strained, thinking, wondering, waiting for her father to come. Making sure her mother couldn't hear through the noise of the machine, she went into the hall when the door clicked. Henry was hanging up his hat. He looked warm and drooped. The sun was still blistering at that hour of the long June day.

" Hello," he spoke quietly and kissed her. " How do you feel? "

" All right. Do you? "

" Yes. It's hot though."

" Everything all right down-town to-day? "

" Pretty good. Going to open up after dinner and catch Saturday nighters."

" Papa——" She drew him into the living-room and shut the door. " What—about the Michelsons? Yesterday Mama let me go there—and now to-day——"

Henry cleared his throat. He wanted to talk to Agnes about Eddie. He wanted to tell her what loyalty was, and

how friends stuck, even when the world fell away. He wanted to tell her to have no fear. But how could he, when he himself was afraid? Why didn't Gus come back to refute the stories going around? Why didn't employees of the insurance company know where he was? A grand jury had been called——

Neither Henry nor Agnes noticed the cessation of noise from the sewing machine over their head. They started apart, like lovers caught in guilt, when Martha stood in the door.

"I thought you were getting dinner," she said in a hurt tone to Agnes.

"I am." Agnes flushed and ran. "It's ready."

Henry went to wash. Deeply wounded, Martha stood in the dining-room.

"This table isn't half set," she said. "It's a wonder I can't leave you to do a single thing alone——"

Agnes moved quickly. She got missing articles and put them in place. Papa came down. He looked white and drawn. Nothing was said at table.

CHAPTER XXIV

Eddie wasn't at school Monday morning. Stella said she shouldn't think he would be. She said she wondered at his coming as long as he had, to say nothing about talking of a trip to Europe. She asked if Agnes meant to tell her she didn't know what had happened? The insurance company had gone bust—that was all! And Eddie's father had run away so he couldn't be put in jail.

Agnes only stared. Having dispensed the meat of the scandal, Stella toyed with succulent details. The Michelson house was going to be taken to settle some of the debts. Jim and the carriage, and everything else the Michelsons had was going.

Agnes got excused from the last class of the day by saying she had a headache. The headache was no fabrication.

Her mind was crowded and tight with things it was holding on to for Eddie and his mother. It was holding the gold box on the piano, and the coffee cups with tinkling spoons, and chairs and tables, and the ice-cream freezer that held so much there was always some left to eat at night. It held them tight, tight—for Eddie and the excited, scudding woman whose open mouth was like a red, cut fruit.

Out of school she found she didn't want to go home. She wanted to go to the paint store instead. There was an extra hour. Mama wouldn't expect her yet, and Papa would take time to talk. No matter if there were customers to wait on, he would take time to talk and tell her, until she knew it, that they couldn't put Eddie's father in jail and take all the things away.

She had turned the corner of the bakery when she saw Eddie. He came out of a shadow and said " Agnes," and dropped back into the shadow again.

She followed him. They stood flattened against a shaded wall like thieves waiting until a policeman should pass.

" Where can we go ? " Eddie spoke first. " We've got to talk."

" Come then." She pushed away from the wall, braving the school building with its glassy, curious eyes. " There's a path through Doyle's lot. Come on."

They passed the school. Miss Dommit leaned from a window to shake an eraser, and saw. They panted and caught their breath in their teeth under the scourge of Miss Dommit's eyes.

In the lot they left the beaten trail. Pressing through underbrush they found a ring of trees, thick and dark. The trees made a green cylinder, uncovered to the sky. Moss was deep on the floor of it, and a fallen log covered with ferns lay across its diameter.

" My father——" Eddie sat on the log beside Agnes, his shoulders not hunched now, nor his face grinning. " There's a grand jury called——"

" I know."

" We had a letter. It came to a friend who gave it to my mother." The boy locked his hands between his knees. " My father can't even write a letter to my mother in the regular way, because if he did they'd know where he was, and bring him back."

" He'll come back of himself," Agnes said steadily. " I know. He'll come and tell it all, and then——"

" He won't come back. Not now. What good would it do to come back and be put—out of the way? He's got to work and make money, so that when he does come, he can pay up. He used money they think he shouldn't have used. But if his schemes had come out right——"

" I won't believe——"

" He'd done it before, and built up a big company. This time luck went against him."

" But you and your mother——" Agnes was still holding, holding tight. " You——"

" We'll go to him, of course. But you——? "

" Me? "

" Yes, you. I've got to know about you. Mother and I are going to-night. Nobody but you knows. We'll be away a long time. I can't even write. So I've got to know—how it is with you."

" I—I——"

" Will you be here, waiting, when I come back? Once my father built a fortune in a hurry. But he's older now. This one may take years. You're so sweet—there'll be other men—who'll want you as I do. And you won't hear from me. You won't know even if I'm alive."

" I—I—lo——" She laboured but the word wouldn't come.

" If I were sure about you, the rest wouldn't hurt so much. My mother and I are going to him, because we love my father. That's the thing that counts, Agnes. That's what I want to know. If I knew that I'd be sure you'd wait——"

" You and your mother—to-night——"

" We're proud to go. Proud to ourselves. We've talked

and we know that we are proud—even if it has to be to ourselves. He's a big man. We're proud to go and help him back to what he's lost. So it isn't us I came to talk to you about. It's you."

"I tried—I tried to say that I lo——"

"I know. But even if you said it, would it mean anything? Would you understand what it meant? If you'd only talked to my mother the other night. She'd have explained. She knows. If she didn't know—would she be striking out to-night to go to my father half across the world?"

"Eddie—I'll wait. I'll be here waiting."

"You've got to be!" Turning he got her hands and brought them against his breast. "You've got to be! I'll be poor when I come. All that Dad and I can make while we're away will go on debts—to pay people who trusted us. I'll be poor. But I'll know how to work by then, and if you're waiting——"

The glaze of tragedy left his eyes like dark water drawn off by the sun. He leaned to her and she to him. His arms went around her, and she lay within them, sobbing, glad, her head against his heart.

Innocent, instinctive with eons of racial memories, they knew the unchanging fashion of love. They slipped to the ground and lay with their backs against the log, crushing the lush ferns that feathered it into a pillow. Across the blue cover of the ring of trees an oriole streaked, drawing a piercing line of song behind him. They turned their faces upward. The song came and went and came again. They were one body, one spirit, one listening ear. Their mouths met and were one mouth.

The sun had walked far towards the west when they rose and stood together, touching at shoulder and thigh and heel. On the path beyond their shelter a boy shouted, driving a cow whose bell tinkled messages of a long day in sufficient fields. Agnes heard the bell and saw the westering sun, and her muscles sprang.

"I'll have to go," she said. "It's late. Mama——"

" Good." Eddie straightened too. His boy's face took on the mould of manhood. " I'll go with you. We'll have to talk to your mother and tell her——"

" No ! " Fastened in his, her hands yet struck sharply against him. " You can't ! It's the last thing——"

" It's the first, and I'm the one to do it."

Struggling for her hands she wrenched free and pushed against the hedge of trees. Eddie got in front of her and held the branches down.

" Listen—Agnes—listen ! She's got to understand——"

" Let me go ! If you dare——" Tenderness went from her face, and she turned the glare of a cornered animal upon him. The boy fell back. She got away, pushing at evergreens, tearing at brambles like a drowning swimmer tearing at the seaweed that strangled him. Beyond the trees she ran and stumbled and fell in the sun-baked pits of the dark trail. Eddie clumped behind, fearful lest swift pursuit might drive her more dangerously forward. She got up before he reached her and plunged headlong towards the street, fighting at invisible tangles when brambles and trees were gone.

Eddie stood at the end of the path, dazed and maddened. All the sweet consolation of hours alone with her was gone. If he followed, it might be more irretrievably lost even than it was. Backed by her mother there was no knowing what Agnes would do or say. He couldn't risk that. He couldn't. Somehow, some way, the vanished solace of her sweetness and trust must be wrestled back to him. Turning, he retraced the path through Doyle's lot and came to the cylinder of trees, and lay on the moss, kissing the imprint that was all she had left behind.

Agnes ran without breath, because there was only a knife in her lungs where breath should have been. Falling up the steps of her home she flung wide the half-opened door and slammed it behind her.

Martha stood in the hall, hatted, dust hemming her skirt.

" Where have you been ? " She grasped Agnes by her

shoulders and shook her until a face white for mercy came up. " I've hunted the town. Your father and I have hunted the town. Where have you been ? "

" School—I've been—to school."

" Don't lie to me ! " Martha relaxed her hold as though freeing her hands of taint. The girl fell against the newel post of the stairs. " Don't you think I've been to school and heard ? Don't you know Miss Dommit saw you traipsing off with that scalliwag's son ? Look at you—look at your clothes. Grass stains—moss ! Oh, my God ! Answer me, Agnes Barnet—where have you been ? "

" Papa——" The child held to the newel post. " Where's my father—let me see my father ! "

" How can you see your father when he's out scouring the country for you ? "

" Oh—poor Papa—oh—— ! "

" Poor Papa ! How about me ? How about the mother who's been through hell for hours—— ? "

" Don't Mama, don't ! I can't stand any more."

" Why can't you stand any more ? What have you stood that you can't stand questions from your mother ? Answer me that. Come to my room and answer me that."

Agnes fled. Angry steps followed. She got to her room, but there was no lock. Doubling back, she ran up the hall. Martha stalked behind and herded her in where she wanted her. Crouching on the floor by the sewing machine Agnes tried not to answer the questions ground continually at her. But she had to answer.

The ordeal was on. A heretic on the rack had more mercy from Holy Office than Agnes Barnet from her mother.

" I haven't been anywhere,." She repeated it again and again. " I had to talk to him."

" Did you get those grass stains and the moss on your dress talking ? Answer me. Tell me all of it."

The front door opened.

" Papa ! " Agnes sprang.

" Keep still." Martha went into the hall.

" That you, Henry ? " she called. " Agnes is home."

" Good."

Martha returned. Agnes lay on the bed. Face down she heard her father below. A chair moved. Martha resumed.

" Sit up,"she said. " Look me in the eye. Now answer."

" I have. I had to talk to him. There wasn't any other place but Doyle's lot. You know there isn't any other place."

" That's what I'm asking. Place for what ? "

" I may never see him again—never in my whole life——"

" Don't be too sure of that. Shot-gun weddings run in his family. If anybody had told me that the child I had lived for and slaved for—the child I thought I had kept innocent——"

" It didn't seem wrong. Honest, Mama—it didn't seem wrong."

" It never seems wrong if it's in you to do it. And I—I thought——"

" You're thinking about you ! " A spark flared in Agnes. " Why can't you think about me ? "

" You ? "

" Yes, me ! Me ! "

" Think about you—now—now when you've brought this upon the mother who bore you ! Now when I—— Go to your room ! Take yourself from my sight. A girl who can be insolent to her mother at a time like this——"

" I'm not insolent. Please—I'm not. I'm only——"

" Go to your room."

" Let me see Papa. Just a minute, alone—let me see——"

" Are you so brazen you could look your father in the face ? "

That was the final question that soiled and blurred, once and for ever, the sweetness of those hours with Eddie.

Sickened with a nameless illness, loathing herself for uncommitted sin, Agnes felt her way from her mother's presence. The street lamp gulped into light as she came

to her room. It bleached all it touched into the grey of unknown abominations. Clothed as she was she lay down and turned to the wall. In a frame above hung the picture of a woman with a cross upon her breast. She had deep, sorrowful eyes. Agnes closed her own at their reproach.

In the night beyond the window crickets wheezed dustily. After the hot day coolness fell from the mountains, pressing perfumes from trees and grass and earth. To the girl on the bed they were sickly distillates of death. She lay unflexed, with rigours of pollution between her bones. Love was dishonour. She had loved Eddie and been soiled by loving. Her mother had warned her of love, but heedlessly she had loved, until now she must hide herself and her corruption even from her father.

It made no difference that her sin was undefined. Telling all there was to tell to her mother, her mother had cried out. So had God cried, perhaps, when he had to whip his first children from the garden. Was love their transgression too ? Agnes was done with love. Never, so long as she lived, would she betray herself to love again. The lulled, hushed hours with Eddie—the misery leaving his eyes—the oriole drawing a line of song across the disc of sky—they were contaminations to be scoured from her soul. She would never love again.

The house grew silent. After long hours sounds of slumber came from Martha's room.

Listening to the boom of the Court House clock, Agnes heard stealthy steps on the attic stairs. Papa was coming to add the stripes of his grief to those she had already received. Eyes closed, she spaced her breath. If she appeared to sleep, further punishment might be postponed. Her door opened. Papa had no lamp nor candle. Through her lids she felt his shadow bending in the grey light from the street. His hands passed over her face, touching her closed eyes. He bowed and kissed her, pushing her hair back from her brow. When he was gone her steady breathing continued and became the cadence of sleep.

CHAPTER XXV

Next day Martha was lynx-eyed. Every move, every flush of her daughter's was subjected to scrutiny. Agnes was kept from school and Henry went to see Miss Dommit, closing his store at a dull hour to do so. In the evening he came with news that Miss Dommit would issue a kind of parole. Afterward, when Agnes was in bed, he told Martha that Leila Michelson and her son had gone, no one knew when or where, but his judgment was that they had gone to Gus.

A bomb dropping upon Martha could not have wrought more havoc.

" Gone ! " was all she could say at first.

Henry had not relinquished his loyalty.

" What good would it do for them to stay ? " he asked.

" Gone ! " Martha intoned.

" Gus needs them, if he ever did."

" Where did they get the money to go with ? Tell me that."

" Probably Leila had some."

" Trust Leila to look out for herself. She's not like some women. And now they're gone ! "

" Gus will come back when he can square up."

" When ? And what good will it do us then ? "

" You act like Gus and his family owed it to us to stay here."

" Little you know what Gus and his precious son may owe us. And now gone—both of them—like the scoundrels they are."

" That will do, Martha. I know what's in your head. It's not true, but even if it were I'd stick to my proposition that the Michelsons hadn't done us any harm. Now, if it's the same to you, I prefer not to hear any more."

Afflicted, Martha forebore to enter combat with Henry. There was terrible, icy dread in her breast. She looked a serpent-haired Medusa in the face.

The dread and its stony emanations remained with her for days. She did little else than read and study in her room. An atmosphere of exigent prayer clothed her. And then suddenly when the Michelson flight was two weeks old, relaxation came. Agnes was taken, rapturously, into favour again. Time and an event had restored Martha, and the dynamos of her life began to run once more.

Activities were resumed vigorously after interruption. Checking off Agnes' wardrobe, she decided the child must have clothes. There were materials in the house, and the sewing-machine hummed. Relief after intolerable strain was a tonic that sent floods of energy through Martha. She was strengthened and fortified in many ways. Whatever had occurred, or not occurred—still there had been a demonstration. Martha remembered to count her blessings at such a time, and found them numerous. First and foremost the Michelson boy was disposed of permanently. She had never liked him, and now she need make concessions and reckon with him no longer. A demonstration had been made, the necessity for a not wholly satisfactory course of action eliminated, and the way cleared for actual good to manifest itself when the time was ripe for its appearance. God had winnowed out certain small seeds of rebellion and self-will in Agnes, and rendered her docile. Truly He had not forgotten His servant Martha.

In a whirlwind of work, she was mystical and rapt. She extracted strange meanings from her books, and evolved new doctrines. Divinity had concentrated on her problems and was busy with solutions. She walked with God. Daily she waited for His Messenger to appear bearing tokens of salvation. It would be concrete, factual salvation here and now, opening the way out from poverty and thwarted desires.

BOOK TWO

MR. LAWSON

CHAPTER I

The messenger lagged. That summer passed, and another, with nothing changed. Martha read her books and revived her visions. The Messenger would come. Patience was the bribe one paid to God. To be patient, and to stand ready with lamp trimmed and burning for the Bridegroom when He appeared, were the only requisites. The Bridegroom would come.

Agnes was eighteen. She had finished school in June, reading the class poem from the auditorium platform, and wearing a dress that excelled all others in handwork and amplitude of sleeves.

She had fulfilled her promise of beauty. In the August following graduation, leading citizens of El Stancias met in solemn conclave and chose her, as the town's loveliest girl, to ride at the head of the Old Home Week Admission Day parade in September.

Martha would have demurred had she not sensed the tribute as an opening gun in a salute to the salvation for which she stood in readiness. Straws indicated the set of the wind. Agnes was taking her rightful place at last, and the Bridegroom could not be far behind.

Practical even in sorcery, Martha set to work. The parade was to recall days of gold and glory in El Stancias. She made Agnes' riding habit in ancient fashion, and conned old books in the town library for a way to do her hair.

Labour was repaid. Nature had done much for Agnes, but Martha did more. Dressing her daughter for the parade, the mother rejoiced. Long curls lay down the girl's flat, straight back in glossy cork-screws, too heavy to bob about as less ambrosial tresses might have done. Unremitting reminders of a hundred strokes a day had

produced sheen and weight in the brown hair. The colour on Agnes' cheeks was high and clear.

She had grown. She was tall, but any tendency to weediness had converted itself into rounds. Her corset lifted high, pointed breasts, and her waist measured a bare twenty inches. She was at once fragile and strong, earthy and ethereal. Except for a chin inclined to tremble and a certain tendency toward quivering along the mouth, she was as nearly Paphian as a steel-sheathed daughter of respectability need be.

Henry Barnet was beside himself with pride at the honour done his child. Agnes was beautiful in his eyes, and she was to ride beside the Governor who had been invited to El Stancias for Admission Day. Other notables were also expected. Roistering Native Sons of the Sierras from Stockton and Sacramento and far San Francisco would come bounding home for the week. They would see Agnes, and wonder at her beauty.

The Native Sons came by trainloads. Boys born in the mountains who had gone forth to conquer plains and sea returned to the place of their nativity. They filled the hotel on Main Street and swarmed into every spare room in town. The Elite Saloon and Geiger's couldn't accommodate their customers. Overflows had to be taken care of by less distinguished resorts.

The Governor and his aides arrived.

William Lawson came.

It had not been known that he was coming. Then on Admission Day morning a private car slid onto a siding at the station, a porter put down a step, and William Lawson, lumber king, bungalow magnate and all-around conqueror, was in El Stancias.

Looking at Agnes, Henry felt that all of them, homing boys, Governor of the State, William Lawson, and all were there to see his child. Rising with Martha on the grandstand built over the Court House steps, he took her arm as the parade went by. Agnes rode past. The ruddy face

of the Governor glowed beyond her as a fitting background for her profile. Her curls lay thick and long and weighted with their own richness. There was a plume in her hat. Western gauntlets with fringed and flaring cuffs set off the slenderness of her hands. The skirt of her habit all but touched the ground. Her face was flushed, and her eyes were wide and dark. Subtlety had come and added itself to other endowments. It was Cynara who passed.

Henry's fingers tightened on Martha's arm. She did not pull away. They stood together, equals before each other and before the world. The perfect thing beside the Governor was theirs. Together they had begotten it and brought it forth. They were peers and partners in the supreme marvel. Martha leaned a little towards Henry. She even augmented her pride with his.

But achievement, after long labour, was too much for her. All at once, when the last float passed and Agnes could no longer be seen, she collapsed.

" It must be the heat," she said, still clinging to Henry. " Standing without any shade over me. I think I'd better go home and lie down for a while."

Without ceremony Henry impressed a horse and buggy from the hitching-rack behind the Square, and drove it around for his wife. The owner of the rig hailed him good-naturedly as he wormed a way through the crowd swarming after the parade.

" Help yourself, Hank," he yelled. " Call around any time."

Henry waved a hand.

Martha was glad of the buggy. Arriving home she thanked Henry as he helped her down and into the house. He put her on the couch and set a glass of water beside her.

" Rest up good," he advised," so you'll be in shape to go and look on at the dance to-night."

" I'm glad Agnes' dress is all done and pressed," Martha

sighed. " I don't believe I could sew a stitch or hold an iron if I had to."

" You never were one to put things off until the last, I'll say that for you, Martha," Henry complimented her.

He drew the window shades. He wanted to be away, out in the crowd, where Agnes rode beside the Governor with curls down her back. And yet—he wanted to stay. It was like being happy again—shut in here in the half dark with a Martha who was quiet and unaccusing.

Martha watched him moving about and for once she was alive to the desires of another.

" You go now, Henry," she said. " Agnes needs her people around. It would look better to have you with her. And you can come home together to lunch."

There was a high hope in Henry's mind.

" How about if they ask her over to the hotel ? " he inquired. " There's going to be a kind of banquet for the nabobs."

" Go along with her, if they do. It would look better."

" Sure there's nothing more you want here ? " Henry stil lhesitated.

" Nothing. I'll just rest."

She rested. Lying with idle hands and mind, she wondered at the tranquillity which had come over her. Only once before had she experienced such a feeling. That was the day prior to Agnes' birth when she had rested for a time, as she was resting now—emotionless, planless, untroubled. Face to face with the inevitable she had been calm, awaiting the pains of travail as a mariner might await his ship. She was calm now. The inevitable was approaching again. The Messenger—the Bridegroom——

CHAPTER II

The parade had disbanded when Henry got back, cheese-cloth-robed Greeks of both sexes had left their floats to eat lunch in the Square, surrounded by their more conventionally garbed families. Cow-hands and miners were getting drunk at Geiger's and The Elite. Floats, swarmed upon by small boys, were being hauled careening through the streets wherever good-natured withdrawal on the part of the citizenry made careening possible. The Wells Fargo stage, once driven by the authentic Yuba Bill, which now turned its wheels only annually when Admission Day justified the risk, was being returned tenderly to the hay dust and murk provided for it by the Livery and Feed. Doors of the First National were open again, and the Daylight Store was doing a land office business in palm-leaf fans.

Considering these evidences of resumed commerce, Henry wondered if he ought to re-open his place too. No, by cracky, he wouldn't ! He'd be jiggered if he would !

He found Agnes, still mounted on her horse, in the midst of a profoundly impressed gathering. She was listening and blushing furiously down towards a man who held her bridle close up against the bit. Henry pushed through the crowd and saw it was Mr. Lawson who was talking to Agnes. It didn't surprise Henry in the least. He should think anybody would want to talk to Agnes.

Agnes saw her father, and waved him towards her urgently.

" Papa," she said, " this is Mr. Lawson." Some traces of earlier stage presence still clung to her.

Mr. Lawson extended his free hand.

" Glad to meet you," he said. " I was just telling Miss Barnet that she was like a party I read about once. Lady Godiva."

" Yes ? " It was all right with Henry, though he too

had read about Lady Godiva. But Agnes went scarlet. The spots on her cheeks looked like spilled blood. She brushed at her skirt to make sure it was covering her, and wondered how much of her would show when she dismounted from her horse.

Determinedly fixing her eyes past Mr. Lawson, she addressed her father.

"They want us to eat with them over at the hotel," she said. "Where's Mama?"

"Resting up at home for the doings to-night. She said you could go to the hotel if you wanted to."

"Now look here, Mr. Barnet, I have plans too." Lawson burlesqued perturbation rather heavily. "I've just been telling Miss Barnet she needn't eat hotel hash when there's an honest-to-God cook in my car. I've invited her to have chow with me. Won't you——" he shied at an obvious necessity but saw no way around it. "Won't you join us?"

"Thanks." Henry appreciated the honour. Eating in William Lawson's private car was no mean distinction. But he'd rather have Agnes at the hotel. "I guess though, when the Governor invites people, they go. Where'd we better tie your horse, Agnes?"

"Tie her horse, nothing!" Defeated, William Lawson rose again. "I'll go to lunch with his nibs too, and arrive there leading the little lady's nag."

Onlookers were delighted. Bill Lawson walking the street leading the horse of a local girl was no sight to be sneezed at. They fell back immediately and fell in again, forming the second procession of the day.

Agnes both revelled in the experience and hated it. Never too clear in thought, she felt herself at once honoured and dishonoured. Under the plumed hat her eyes saw through a glassy, wavering mist. She couldn't help looking at Mr. Lawson, and she didn't like him much, even if everybody else did. On the other hand she had adored the Governor. His bigness and redness were hard. Applause

bounced off him. Mr. Lawson seemed to soak applause in, and to make rough and ready remarks, not because he liked people, but because they could give him what he liked. She supposed he was handsome. He was tall and heavy, with arms too long even for his height, and when he turned towards her she saw that his eyes were too close to his nose. She decided that for all his manner of being back with home folks, he never forgot the private car waiting on the tracks.

Lunch, to Agnes, was as confusing as the ride. She sat at the Governor's right. Mr. Lawson on the other side of her leaned and kept on whispering about Lady Godiva. It made her hot and cold. The story seemed to mean more than it ought to mean, when he referred to it. He said he'd known that she was Lady Godiva the minute he saw her in the parade—but Lady Godiva in disguise. His eyes went over the disguise like hands tearing it away. They came to rest at the line where her corset held her young, sharp bosom. Without looking up he said that he would play the other part in the story, and pay off all back taxes in town, if she'd ride in the right costume.

She wished she had a shawl, an Indian blanket, anything, to hide the line where her corset held her bosom.

The Governor heard a hushed reference to taxes, and said something about reductions after election. Mr. Lawson studied Agnes, bit by bit, hands and throat and arms and hair, returning to the line where her corset stopped. She tried to make herself flat and formless again as she had been as a child. The moment she could, she went to her father across the table and said they must go home and rest for the ball that night. Then, because Mr. Lawson looked glum at her unceremonious withdrawal, unexplainably she went back to him and gave him her hand.

"You'll be at the ball, won't you?" she asked.

"What ball?" he asked sullenly.

Having Mr. Lawson mad was somehow like having

Mama mad. She hastened to make any amends she could.

"At the hall," she said and looked earnestly and invitingly at him. "I'll save a dance—if you'll come."

He revived instantly.

"Better save more than one. Like flowers? Then I'll see if there's a bouquet to be got in town. Too late to send to the city for them now."

Agnes was asleep when a box arrived from the local greenhouse. Martha opened it and read the card. It seemed not at all remarkable to her that William Lawson was sending flowers to Agnes. Why not? Agnes had been beautiful that day. No man had ever seen a girl more beautiful than Agnes had been that day. The flowers failed to ruffle her serenity. She took them as she had taken Henry's slightly addled account of the ride up Main Street. Centuries before Martha Barnet's time the Lord Buddha discovered that life and not-life were identical in the Absolute. Martha swung in the Absolute. She had attained Nirvana for a time.

So desirable did she find her coma, that she refused to crack its shell even by going to the dance. Suggesting that Henry do the chaperoning himself, she roused herself as evening came to get out the old dress-suit he had been married in, and put a gusset in the back of the vest. After that she helped Agnes, and got William Lawson's roses from the cooler where they had been stored.

"Don't get excited," was her only warning. "You'll be all right if you keep your head."

Agnes nodded. Keeping her head meant acting as she had been taught to act, and she did that automatically now.

There was applause when Henry and his daughter came into Native Sons' Hall, and hearing it William Lawson turned from the group that had gathered around him.

When he didn't cross the room immediately, Agnes was oddly piqued. She was on her mettle. There must be no

public reversal of her conquest of the morning, before all El Stancias. She nodded, smiled, and even hugged her roses a little, quite openly.

Lawson finished his conversation with the group, and came leisurely towards her.

" My dance," he said peremptorily, and waltzed her on to the floor.

For all he again looked glum, he held her tighter than she had ever been held before. But she had to keep him—she had to—with all El Stancias looking on. What if he stayed mad, and didn't ask her to dance again? People would laugh. Stella was watching now, over Chuck Stubbs' shoulder, waiting to laugh. Agnes relaxed, and the top of her corset pressed against Mr. Lawson's ribs.

The effect was instantaneous. She might have thought she was held tight before, but she didn't know. Afraid to push away without an excuse, she thought of her roses.

" My flowers," she gasped. " They're sticking to my arm. Let's give them to my father to hold. I think they're just lovely."

Back from depositing the roses with Henry, Mr. Lawson resumed where he had left off. No other possible excuse for release came to Agnes. She mustn't make Mr. Lawson mad again. His legs brushed past her as they danced. She had to let them brush, feeling his big muscles through her skirt and petticoats. She had even to return, just perceptibly, the pressure of his body against hers. Otherwise he would be mad again, and people would laugh. Suddenly hotly aware of her father at the other end of the hall, she knew she couldn't let him see her in that tight embrace.

" Dance up here," she said upward to her partner. " My father——"

" You little devil ! " Lawson breathed through her hair and down her ear. " I like girls with the Old Nick in them. Looked for a time as though you were a whole train of refrigerator cars. But I see my mistake. Good for you. Know what I'm going to do to-night? Wire to town for

decorations. Then you're coming to my car to-morrow—see—and have lunch with me. Understand ? "

" But I can't—my mother——"

" Oho ! That's your game. Play like any other kitten, but with the cat on the job to give it looks. All right, I'll come in this once, with you standing pat, and drag to my hand."

" I couldn't have lunch with you, alone—really."

" Cute, aren't you ? But didn't I say I'd stand for it this once, and drag to my hand ? Bring the old lady, and the old gent too, and see who wins."

When the music stopped her back hurt from the pressure of his hands. Nevertheless she rose with him for the next dance.

El Stancias responded with gusto to the situation. At the end of the ball, Lawson had danced with no one but Agnes Barnet. Henry was patted on the back. Groups gathered and commented that it looked like Bill Lawson had set out to spark the Barnet girl. If a deal like that went through, it would mean something to the town. Any town that Bill Lawson fancied was in to have leverage put under it. Falling to the whisper level remarks carried the import that it would be a God-send to Hank Barnet if something happened. Good old Hank !

In the cloak-room Emmons of the First National parted out Henry from the crowd, and hinted that there were business secrets which might be divulged for old friendship's sake. Lawson had come to the celebration in El Stancias on his way up-country to look at timber reserves. If he bought and began logging on his usual scale, the railroad would have to build extensions. El Stancias would become a genuine junction. Operations started, hundreds of men would spend the money earned in camps when they came to El Stancias on Saturday nights. Lawson might open offices in the town, and make it his southern headquarters.

Henry squinted his eyes appreciatively, but he didn't quite understand what the back-clapping and confidences

were about. Early in the evening he'd seen that Agnes was having a nice time, and had turned to his own devices. He'd drunk punch and talked to old-timers.

Looking past Emmons he saw Agnes in the corridor talking to Mr. Lawson. They seemed to be fixing something up between them. He hadn't thought anything could be prettier than Agnes at the head of the parade, but, by George ! look at her now ! All flushed and flustered, as red and ripe as a pippin ! Hooking into her arm to take her home, he heard Lawson joking and laughing.

" All right, I'll play," Mr. Lawson said. " Bring the family. Lead me on. I like it."

Martha was still sitting up when they got home. She didn't have her books. She was just sitting. She looked up and thought that Henry was almost like the old Henry she had set such store by, as he came in, immaculate, undeniably a gentleman, in his antiquated clothes.

" Well, Mama," Henry spoke through a rosy afterglow of punch, " I bring back the belle of the ball."

" Did it go nicely ? " she asked modestly.

" Guess so. Anyway, your daughter did, Mrs. Barnet."

" Who did you dance with, Agnes ? "

" I saw her started with Mr. Lawson," Henry put in. " After that I lost count."

" I hope you remembered to thank Mr. Lawson for his flowers, dear."

" Yes, I remembered."

" People clapped when we came in," Henry interpolated. " And the first time Agnes danced they stood back for a minute and gave her the floor." He hadn't intended to tell that while Agnes was around, but he couldn't keep it.

" Really ? " Martha smiled. " Run along, daughter, and get some sleep."

Agnes laughed. She had been of two distracted minds all evening. Now bubbles formed in her throat and broke with happiness. It was so wonderful to really please Mama.

" Mr. Lawson has asked all of us, you and Papa and me, to have lunch on his car to-morrow." Since felicity had arrived with the little Henry had said, what transports might not be expected from this ? The evening had been a success. It positively glittered in retrospect. She forgot how her back ached from Mr. Lawson's embrace.

" That's very nice of him, I'm sure," Martha replied to her. " Can you get away, Henry ? "

" Want me to ? " Henry wasn't sure how far to stretch his luck.

" It would look better for Agnes to have her family with her. A man respects a girl who has backing."

" Then I'll lock up for an hour or so," Henry planned. " There isn't much trade during celebrations." Starting for his room, he came back. " Emmons says Lawson has his eye on some timber tracts in the mountains, and that if he takes them it will be good for the town."

" It's about time something was good for the town," Martha said affably. " Did your suit look all right, Henry, along with the others ? "

" Guess so. Nobody said it didn't."

" Papa looked sweet," Agnes added. " I was proud of him."

Placid as she was, Martha's faculty for planning went into operation.

" If the town picks up," she said, " and we with it, you'll have to get yourself some clothes, Henry."

" Who knows but maybe I can ? If the town booms, I'll boom too."

" We could stand a little booming." Martha rose from her chair as reluctantly as any contented woman severing relations with a pleasant day. " I'm going up."

" By hickory, it's one o'clock." Henry studied his watch in delight and amazement. " Time for us all to turn in. Want you to get your beauty sleep before you lunch on Mr. William Lawson's private car. You're still a mighty handsome woman, Martha."

" It's nice of you to say so, whether I am or not." She knew that she was. " Coming, Agnes ? "

Agnes slept hard, but her dreams were reprehensible. They had to do with Eddie Michelson. She never allowed herself to think of him when awake, but he often came back in her dreams. That night he seemed to be in a big, empty house, calling to her, hunting for her through endless, vacant rooms. She hid from him in a dark, smothering closet that pressed against her back, and flattened her skirts against her limbs.

Martha required singularly few hours of repose. She was up and around before Henry left, attacking work she had planned in bed. Agnes was her first consideration. Dampening and pressing pleats into a white duck skirt, Martha ironed the lace of a shirt-waist into spider-web points. Her own clothes were in their usual perfect order. Going up to Henry's room, she looked over his other suit. She laid out a shirt and the tie he looked best in. Relieved of habitual anger, she drew her husband into the circle with Agnes and herself. No one need be ashamed of Henry on even Mr. Lawson's private car. She had a fleeting revelation that Henry's manifest integrity was a flattering background to his family. When he appeared at home at a little before twelve, she shooed him upstairs good-naturedly to bathe and shave and dress.

He stopped on the way to boast of a business coup.

" Didn't lock up after all," he twinkled down at his wife. " Got the boy who runs errands sometimes to come in and watch the store. Good plan to see if he's smart and honest. May need a clerk, later on."

When he came down Martha was turning Agnes slowly around to make sure of the exactness of her pleats.

" You don't imagine Lawson'll get an idea we're running after him, do you ? " he asked.

" As far as I can see," Martha replied, " he's running after us."

Reassured, Henry got his hat. He wanted to whistle

his tune, but desisted. Nor for years had he felt like a part of his family.

" Well," he consulted his watch, " time to start."

They went together, Henry and Martha, with Agnes between them. Henry would have liked the middle position, arms linked with both.

Mr. Lawson came down the platform from the siding to welcome them. His car resembled a florist's shop. Orders from San Francisco had arrived and been placed. He had gone in for lilies in a big way. Callas were tied in sheaves by hard curtain cords at the windows, and thick-stalked amaryllis stood in polished receptacles suggestive of a smoking-room. Variations of the motif were plentiful on the table and window ledges.

Martha had too sure an instinct for elegance to be awed. She behaved well, and Agnes, watching for leads, did likewise. Lawson, who had expected to impress, found himself impressed. He had to revise certain plans. These people might be poor, but he didn't think it would pay to take any liberties with them. They made him remember, restlessly, that he was after all the same unsavoury boy who had swiped a boatload of asparagus and a rancher's daughter. Mrs. Barnet was especially formidable. If anybody wanted to have a little fun with that girl of hers, he'd have her to reckon with. She looked like the kind that would make an issue of honourable intentions. To hell with honourable intentions.

But the girl was such a sly little devil, and so damned tempting. What did she want to go and wear a pink hat for, when she knew it made her face the colour of a sea shell ? She looked like the blamed amaryllis blooms behind her as she sat at table beside him. She glanced at him, and when he scowled to see what she would do, there was just the bare suggestion of a snuggle about her. A sly proposition, but warm. There were points of moisture above her upper lip. What did that mean ?

Lawson had a book, in a collection kept under lock and

key on his yacht, that had been written by a French specialist who contended you could tell all you needed to know about a woman by the down on her face and arms. He looked at Agnes' arms. They were sleeved to the wrists. To hell with long sleeves.

Remembering his capacity of host, he began to talk about himself. Henry Barnet, too natural and friendly to hold pride in accomplishment against any man, listened with interest.

" You might think this car was the only home I had," Lawson gestured. On his right hand he wore a ring set with three sizeable diamonds. " But it isn't. You'll all have to come and take a ride with me some time in a boat I've fixed up. Often take parties up the coast to the mills in Oregon."

Martha looked at him and smiled. It came to her that he was just a great, big, bounding, awkward boy. She liked boys who remembered that a girl had a mother who ought to be included in invitations.

" I certainly want you folks to see my boat," Lawson ramped ahead.

" I've never seen a boat," Agnes said timidly. " I've never seen the ocean. I was born right here, and I've never been away."

Lawson managed to touch her shoulder as he pushed at some amaryllis behind her. Wasn't she the little dickens though, nailing his suggestions down like that? He'd bet a lot went on under the old lady's eye that the old lady never suspected. A few days at sea with a girl like that wouldn't be so bad. Not bad at all.

" Tell you what," he said when the amaryllis could be fixed no longer. " Soon as I get back from up-country where I'm going to-morrow—in about a week, I should say —the three of you be ready to come along with me on this car. We'll stop off in San Francisco for a while, and then drop down and connect with the *Claribel* in San Pedro. Claribel's the name of my boat."

Martha said that would be very nice, but she was sure Mr. Lawson had older friends he would rather entertain. Henry said he couldn't leave business. Agnes looked at her mother.

Lawson thought he heard a hint in the refusals. The old lady acted as though she wasn't sure his usual companions were the right company for a young girl. It was becoming clearer every minute that the mother didn't know what kind of young girl her daughter was. He remembered the pressure of Agnes' body against his when they danced, and the way she looked down, as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

"Nobody else along on the party," he threw out. "Just the three of you and myself."

Back of an undecided expression, Martha was deciding that she and Agnes would go. Henry, of course, would dig his heels in and balk at leaving the store. But having made his appearance, and established the fact of a gentleman father for Agnes, he might be allowed to withdraw for a while. It would be nice for her and Agnes to leave El Stancias and housework and the humdrum of life for a while for the comforts of a luxurious boat. She wondered if Mr. Lawson would take them to the Palace for their stop-over in San Francisco. She and Agnes would go. However, Mr. Lawson must not get an impression that they were too eager.

"You're very kind," she said. "We will think about it."

"I'm not thinking." Lawson moved a fraction of an inch nearer Agnes. She didn't move back. "I know—my end of it at least. Look here, I'll put something down, to show I'm in earnest. How about souvenirs of this lunch? I could send the coon out and get a few little things——"

"We couldn't allow you to do that." Martha resisted, but she knew she was succumbing to William Lawson. Once Walter Morgan had bullied her and turned her out of his house, and a deep luxury of feeling, a sensuous

debauch of docility had followed his brutality. This big, awkward boy was assaulting her with other methods, opposite, but equally excessive, and she was responding. Voluptuously she bent towards a will stronger than her own.

" We couldn't allow you to do that," she repeated. " If gifts are to be given, we should give them. You've showered us with your hospitality——"

" What's a car and a boat and a few meals compared to what you folks can give ? " Lawson moved still closer to Agnes, and again she did not retreat.

He leaned towards her, utilising the amaryllis as a reason again. Involuntarily Agnes turned her head sharply, jarringly. Close beside the car the grey end of the station was like thick fog, and the water tower spraddled iron legs down from a fat tank to the ground. Everything stood still, but she had a sensation of moving, or lurching and swaying until she was a little sick. But if Mama thought everything was all right—if Mama was happy——

She reached for a lily in the sheaf behind her and touched Mr. Lawson's hand. She held her fingers against his as though she didn't want to jerk them back and brush them clean of his touch against her skirt.

" Want that ? " He heaved across in front of her. She made herself let him lean against her.

Martha didn't see. She was busy thinking. Henry was engaged with resentment over the suggestion of souvenirs. He wasn't taking presents from new acquaintances, and he didn't want Martha or Agnes to take them either.

" Maybe I was brash about the souvenirs," Lawson said. He was in his place again, his side tingling from contact with the girl. " You've got different ideas up here than we have down in the city. Why, folks don't think any more of picking up a breast-pin or a bracelet from beside their plate when they go out to dinner, than they do of having their meal paid for. It's so common they make jokes about it. You know—one actor on the stage says he knows a girl that got a pearl out of an oyster. The other actor says that's

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nothing, he knows one that got a diamond sun-burst out of a lobster."

His fingers executed a graphic, lobsterish crawl on the table. He wanted to touch Agnes again. The damned girl was getting him. The more she sat still and never let on, the harder she got him. He'd always been that way with women. When he fell, he fell hard and immediately. And this little piece had more than most to offer. He had frequented too long with the city-worn and city-soiled not to feel his appetite whetted by anything as pink and white as this. For a full minute after the joke about the lobster was spent, the illustrative encroaching movement of his hands continued. Agnes had either to laugh or scream. She laughed.

Henry rose suddenly from the table.

" Got to get back," he said. " Left the store with a boy. Get your things, Martha. We owe Mr. Lawson an apology for eating and running——"

Lawson turned quick anger upon the waiter.

" Hi—you ! " he called. " Gone to sleep ? Where's our coffee ? Sure we want it at the table." He turned to Martha. " He thinks we want it afterward, up front like——"

" Oh, yes—let's ! " Agnes saw escape from the crowded seat. Then because Mr. Lawson looked glum again, she brushed very close to him as he stood to let her pass. In the parlour end of the car, Henry sat down beside her. Lawson stood with his coffee. He was restored to good humour.

" It's all fixed then," he announced. " You're coming with me when I get down from the mountains."

" I'd enjoy it," Henry said, " but I have a store."

" You then ? You and the young lady ? " he appealed to Martha.

" Must we decide now ? In a week when you're back from the mountains, we'll let you know."

Irritated, Lawson set his cup on the waiter's tray and said good-bye stiltedly as he gave a hand to each of them

in turn. Agnes tightened her fingers in his, but couldn't make him smile.

From the rear platform he watched the trio trudge through the dust of the yards. If they hadn't been so damned high-toned about his invitation, he'd have sent the porter for a hack for them.

Snapping a folding-chair into shape, he sat down. The girl's hair had been a thick, warm club of braids under her hat. Yesterday it had hung in curls long enough to strangle a man. Last night at the dance he'd breathed through it and got its fragrance. It smelled like sapling twigs with the bark peeled down. It was like spring, and other things that got into your blood. Having at last caught the perfume of clean women he wanted more and more of it—in his nostrils and on his tongue. His face went lax with wanting it. Floozies reeking with drug-store stuff would never do for him again. He wanted girls—that girl.

And it wasn't as though she didn't promise more than the smell of her hair. Look how she snuggled. How many men had she snuggled up to, that way ? The question made him hot all over. She was his garden of spring and sapling twigs. His. He became resigned to Mrs. Barnet. The old lady might not see such a whale of a lot, but she'd never let the investment of the main thing get away. She was a business woman. Likely enough she had an eye on William Lawson this minute. Give her a chance, and he'd wake some morning with wedding bells ringing in his ears, and a mother-in-law in the offing. A good way to avoid that risk was to give the whole outfit the go-by when he came down from the mountains. They deserved it, and he'd do that very thing, if it weren't for the girl.

But the girl excited him, curiously. One of the books he kept under lock and key devoted a chapter to the innocent debauchery of certain types of women, and she looked and acted like the type. Innocent debauchery ought to be something new. With it as a compensation, he might think of marrying—if the old lady proved too much for him on the

Claribel. He'd thought of marrying before, but none of the women he could have got were right for the job.

Ambitious and successful, he'd found both ambition and success thwarted in one direction. He hadn't got far socially. Certain heavy doors along certain wide streets in San Francisco and elsewhere still made him feel like a lout from an asparagus ranch when he passed them. Angrily he was beginning to perceive that women kept those doors shut and that only a woman could open them. Like Martha, half measures enraged him. He wanted all there was.

The girl under the pink hat had something—maybe that elusive thing, good breeding—mixed up with her slyness.

"Hi—you!" he yelled at the porter. "Take those decorations down and hire a truck to cart them to the house where the bouquet went yesterday. Move!"

Sitting on his folding chair, he chewed the end of a cigar and thought about Agnes. One thing you could feel pretty safe in, with a girl whose mother had an eye to the main chance, was that she'd never really been touched. A dame like Mrs. Barnet would watch out for what counted. No slightly soiled merchandise for him when it came to marrying, and getting in through the big doors.

And she was pretty. He thought of her as she had been that day, shell coloured under her hat. He thought of her as she would be on the *Claribel*, blown and tumbled by the wind. Of course when he said untouched, he wasn't fanatical. He didn't mean untouched by him. He was a poor hand at waiting—to say nothing of a boat being a damned poor place to wait.

That night the Barnet house swelled with blooms. Flowers filled vases, pans, pitchers, the sink, the bath-tub and the wash-stand. Martha set a jar of tuberoses on Agnes' dresser. Their heavy fragrance thickened the air. Before going to bed, Agnes raised the screen and set them on the window ledge. A touch was all that was needed to send them crashing to the ground outside. Martha came in.

"I couldn't help it." Agnes tried to meet her mother's

eye. " Really I couldn't. They just flopped over and fell."

She stood switching her hands against her night-gown, as though cleaning them.

CHAPTER III

Henry could have seen through a glass darkly, but he was helpless in a glare. William Lawson seemed taken with Agnes, and Henry wanted to view him critically. But everything conspired against that.

Phenomenal changes at home might be attributed to lunches on a private car and invitations for trips, or they might be due to Martha's age. She was young for it, but Henry had heard that occasionally women who lost their balance when their babies came got it again as change of life approached.

He wanted to remember about the possible girl from the asparagus ranch that Walter Morgan had mentioned, but as nobody else, not even Martha, seemed to recall that, it looked as though there had never been anything in it.

Other changes dazzled him too. He hardly knew his store these days, it was so busy. Men who'd all but forgotten him came in, and women too. B. J. Winters sat on a keg of white lead thirty minutes one day waiting for a chance to order shutter paint and talk.

" Coupla gallons of that," said B. J. eventually, putting a wide index finger on a colour card. " I'll send the chore boy for it. And by the way, Hank——" He relapsed to the keg, " You got to get back on the Square. I'm too fat to climb this hill every time I want a nickel's worth of putty. If Lawson takes a shine to this town, like it seems maybe he will, it'll boom. He'll open offices here, and log up above on his usual scale. A Saturday night pay-roll blown in once a week'd make a difference in El Stancias."

Henry twiddled his watch-charm, toying with visions.

" Nothing like money coming in," he said.

" In October, when it's up, I won't renew the lease on your old place to the present occupants, if you say to hold off."

Henry reminded B. J. that he was conservative and didn't plunge.

" Emmons'll do the plunging," B. J. countered. " Prospects are different from when he tightened up on you. He'll put up what's required, and take a mortgage on your new place as security."

A customer entered.

" As I said," B. J. declaimed loudly, " you and your Missus run over one night. We got a set of duplicate whist boards, and it's interesting when you play regular, and switch hands around."

As though B. J.'s proposition didn't suffice, Agnes added her quota to her father's confusion. She bloomed in the ameliorated climate of her home. After a brief attack of queerness subsequent to the party on the car, she revived and frolicked between her parents like a puppy that didn't know which amiable shoestring to chew first.

Henry had to talk his bedevilment out, and the only place to talk family affairs was at home. He approached Martha cautiously.

" Agnes seems spry as a cricket," he said in the kitchen one night when Martha was waiting to sweep up the litter of his shavings. " Out there in the yard with Stella, I declare you couldn't tell which was which, if Agnes wasn't prettier."

Martha produced a sigh as she bent to her dust pan.

" She's all the chick or child we've got," she said. Henry savoured the morsel of Agnes being his chick too.

" Shouldn't we hold our horses, though, right now ? " he asked finally. " This trip—I've heard that young folks fall in love on boats."

" There's always the chance Agnes will fall in love. All we can hope is that when she does it will be with a man who can make her happy."

" What do you think of Lawson ? "

" At present I think he's a great boy, stumbling over his feet in front of a pretty girl. On the boat I'll have a chance to see more of him."

" You won't get carried away ? "

" Me ? Carried away ? "

" No. I guess if anybody can keep her head, it's you."

Agnes flung open the screen door, cheeks and eyes like tinder.

" Mama—— ! " She had to swallow twice. " Stella—Mama—Stella says Papa is going back on the Square ! "

Martha received it without a shock. She looked at her husband, accepted his hesitancy, and felt the blessing of new hope.

" You'd like that ? " she asked the child.

All at once bereft of the power to stand, Agnes dropped to a chair, and turning half around, supported her arms on its back.

" I'd—nothing else in the world would count—if only you and Papa—Papa and you——"

She began to weep wildly and noisily.

Martha set the broom aside, and took her daughter in her arms.

" There." She patted the wrenching back. " Mustn't cry just because you're happy. Henry, run up and turn down her bed."

" What's up ? " Henry twiddled his watch-charm wretchedly.

Indicative of a changing attitude towards him, Martha winked at her husband.

" Such a high-strung baby." She pressed the sweet, throbbing body. " Run along, Henry—and see if there's warm water for a bath."

Next evening the three of them went together to call on the Winters. Agnes' attack of nerves had passed. Wedged between her parents she walked soberly, an arm in the arm of each. Currents of concord passed through her, from

Henry to Martha, and from Martha to Henry. She was the catalyst welding them into one.

B. J.'s urge for duplicate whist wasn't imperative.

" When Martha comes home from her trip," he asserted, " the four of us can take it up and play regular. No point to the game if you lose track of what's in the hands."

" Am I going on a trip ? " Martha asked quizzically.

" Of course you are," Belle put in.

" About the old place on the Square," B. J. launched forth. " Only half of it available now, but when the lease on the other part is out, I'll give you first call. You'll need the whole shooting match when the town opens up, like it's going to."

In the back parlour, separated from irrelevant discussions of leases and business expansion, Agnes listened to Stella's questions, and heard what went on in the other room as well. Stella's queries were persistent, and eaten through with envy.

" It's nothing." Agnes endeavoured to be modest. " Mr. Lawson takes parties along whenever he goes up the coast."

" He isn't taking a party of me and my mother," Stella said miserably. It was her unconditional surrender, the full document of her defeat.

Victory over Stella was precious, but Agnes was merciful to the vanquished.

" We're just lucky, Mama and I."

" Lucky—oh, my Lord ! " The shift of Stella's eyes was phosphorescent with tears.

Idling sensuously in her thoughts, Martha had sped her fingers in the days following Mr. Lawson's departure for the mountains. Down to breakfast and at her sewing machine immediately after, she had wrought marvels for Agnes. As there were still materials untouched after the crisis of two years before, she repeated none of her earlier indiscretions of buying. Aware of dangers lurking in discord, she moved warily, remembering that Henry was prone to get his back up. The last thing she wanted Henry

to do now was to get his back up. For the first time in her wifely career she tied the bandage of compliance over his eyes and drove with unseen reins.

Her continence in the matter of the Daylight Store did not go unremarked by Martha.

" If I went out and bought off-hand, like most women, there would be a pretty to-do," she said to Agnes one day.

Agnes nodded, crouching over a pattern on the floor.

" What are you going to make for yourself ? " she asked. " It all seems to be for me, so far."

" Nobody's going to look at me," Martha said insinuatingly.

Agnes swayed back on her heels.

" You always think of me first," she said. " I've got a lot to make up to you for, Mama. Maybe I can too—some time. If ever I can——"

" Slip this on so I can see the collar." Martha held up a geometrically basted jacket. Agnes rose, thrust her arms into sleeveless arm-holes and squirmed to see herself in the mirror. Martha slapped playfully, and Agnes straightened around laughing.

" Guess what ? " she said, emboldened. " Stella walked home with me when I went to get thread, and what, of all things, do you think she asked ? She wanted to know if I ever heard from—Eddie Michelson ! "

She was a little breathless, for all her daring, at saying the name.

Martha put some pins in her mouth and spoke through them.

" The trouble with Stella is that she's jealous of you. She'd make trouble if she could."

" Did she—do you think—did she like Eddie ? " After saying Eddie once, she wanted to go on saying it.

" Are we going to waste time on a busy day talking of people we've forgotten ? "

" I guess that's what it is—I guess we've forgotten." Some intimation of her own young hardness made her

wonder that she felt no twinge. She had forgotten. Immanent concerns occupied her mind.

" Am I—Mama—am I pretty ? " While Martha pinned, Agnes surveyed herself in the mirror. The band of red around the jacket collar was no brighter than her cheeks. The blue of the coat deepened the blue of her eyes.

Martha spanked again. There was an old rule against encouraging vanity, but it was nullified by a law governing the usefulness of good points realised. She compromised.

" All healthy, well-behaved girls are pretty," she said. " Pretty is as pretty does. There—that fits."

Agnes slipped the jacket off, and while her mother worked, took up a basted sleeve and ran an arm into it. Silk lining. Silk was like soft winds rustling. There was taffeta in the skirt too. It murmured when you walked. She put the skirt on and walked, ears and nerves tuned to the murmur of the silk. Her mother knew what she was doing and smiled indulgently.

" Stella's crepon is only lined with taffeta to the knees," Agnes said after a while. " It's other stuff the rest of the way."

" Make-shifts are hard to put up with," Martha said over the jigging presser foot of the machine. " I hope we're done with them."

Agnes sank into the rocking-chair meditatively. Prolific gores swept out and around her feet. She'd have to hold them up when she walked. My, but she was growing up ! Crossing her knees she swung one foot against the silk lining and rocked.

It was fun talking to Mama when Mama was the way she was lately. Agnes thought of topics of conversation.

" Remember Judy Smith ? She used to go to school with us. Well, Stella says she's married."

" I didn't see it written up in the paper."

" Her father kept it out. She was only married last week. Some boy named Lewis."

" Lewis ! Never heard of a Lewis. Why did her father keep the wedding out of the paper ? "

" I don't know. I guess maybe because they ran off."

" Ran off ? Of all things ! "

" He isn't much, I guess. Stella said he was just a line-man for a surveying party that came up here two years ago. Judy kind of liked him then."

" Well, so much for Judy Smith. I'm sorry for her folks."

" Judy wrote to Stella after she ran off with him, and she said she still liked him."

" Even a girl who's made a fool of herself and broken the hearts of her parents can like a man for a week."

Agnes rocked and thought.

" Girls ought to look ahead, oughtn't they ? Now you take Mrs. Michelson——"

" What's started you harping on the Michelsons ? "

" I was just talking."

" Well, talk about something else."

The machine buzzed.

Agnes swept the silk back and forth across her foot.

" What'll Judy do—if she doesn't like him after a while ? " she asked at length.

" She'll probably have a baby by the time she finds out what she's let herself in for—and then she can't do anything."

Agnes felt her way towards a forbidden topic cautiously.

" Isn't it queer about babies ? " she asked. " I should think—it looks as if—I mean——"

" Run down and see what's in the cooler for dinner," Martha said decisively. " Your father will be home any minute now. Take that skirt off before you go."

The occult subject of babies dissipated itself in the kitchen. Agnes mused on other matters through the clatter of pans and dishes. It was fun to have the best of Stella for once. Stella was wild about not being asked on the trip. She'd be wild about the skirt with the silk lining all the way to the top, too, when she heard about it. How

nice the house seemed when Mama was the way she was now. Poor Mama—she'd had to do without so long. She needed trips and good times. She deserved so much—never thinking of herself—going ahead and sewing so hard for her daughter—and never thinking of herself. Daughters ought to think of what they owed their mothers—not run off and marry linemen, like Judy Smith.

If only Mr. Lawson wouldn't lean over when he sat beside you. His hands were big, and hung down too far. If only he wouldn't trail them along your back when he fixed flowers behind you. He must be a wonderful man, though. Think what it would mean if he liked El Stancias well enough to have offices and all the rest in town. Look what had happened to Papa already. Look at him—as easy as you please around the house—and Mama sweeping up his litter in the kitchen without a word. If he moved back to the Square——

A girl ought to look ahead when she got married. Poor Judy Smith !

CHAPTER IV

At dinner that night Henry was like a rubber band. He stretched, and then relaxed, and made jokes that Martha didn't mind at all. When Martha said she had to whip brush-braid on Agnes' skirt, he stretched. When she said she'd bring her sewing to the living-room he relaxed with a pun about brushing upstairs and whipping down again. It was pretty poor, but she let it pass.

" You might as well out with it, Henry," Martha said, when she'd brought the braid and the skirt. Listening as she cleared up the dining-room, Agnes piled plates noiselessly. Martha sat plying a needle steadily along four yards and a half of skirt. Agnes carried her plates to the kitchen.

When she returned Henry was sorting papers from his breast pocket. She gathered forks and spoons and watched

him. He carried such a lot in his pocket. The thin pass-book with the unimportant balance, colour cards, and announcements that salesmen would call on such and such a day. Shuffling the sheaf he selected an envelope.

" Had a letter from Lawson," he said, trying to be casual. " He wants to know if I'd consider taking charge when he opens California headquarters here."

Martha's needle hung in mid-air. The roll of brush-braid fell and unwound itself on the floor.

" Well ? " Her voice was almost no voice at all. When Henry didn't answer, her breath returned and she spoke sharply. " You're going to do what he says ? "

Agnes put down the forks and spoons and tiptoed in.

" I'm afraid——" Henry cleared his throat.

" Afraid ! " Martha was thoroughly articulate on the instant. " What of ? If Mr. Lawson opens offices, they'll go."

" I was going to say that I'm afraid Mr. Lawson doesn't remember I've got a business of my own."

" Do you call what you've been doing for the past twenty years business ? "

" Don't you ? That settles it then. If I'm not capable of making a go of myself, I'm not going to saddle another man with my incompetence."

" I'm not saying you're incompetent." Martha saw her mistake and modified her tone. " But lots of men who don't succeed by themselves are all right working for some-one else."

" Thanks."

" Henry Barnet——" Her tenure of control was short. " Henry Barnet, if you let this chance pass you by——"

" Now look here, Martha——"

" Look here ! Look here ! I've been looking here for half a life-time—with never anything to look at. I tell you right now——"

" Mama—listen to him ! " Agnes touched her mother, but her eyes were fixed on her father.

Martha bit back the flood behind her lips. Agnes' touch recalled her policy of discretion. Henry mustn't get his back up. Of all times within memory, this was the least propitious for Henry to get his back up.

"All right," she said, reaching for the braid. "I'll listen."

Henry showed signs of having gotten his back up already.

"I was about to remark," he said caustically, "that I won't give up my store. Lawson may be all he seems to be, but my store's meant a chance to live to me for a long time."

"Live!" in a muffled exclamation.

"That's what I said. And I won't give it up."

"Very well, then—keep it." Martha made the concession as insulting as she dared. "Stick to the store that's meant so much to you, and nothing to your wife and child. Thank heaven, you can't hold other people back with you for ever."

"That's just it!" Henry reverted to rubber-band resilience. He had good tidings to deliver regardless of obstacles. "Holding on to the store isn't what it was once. If Lawson opens headquarters here, as his offer to me guarantees, hard times in El Stancias are over. I told B. J. to-day I'd take the place on the Square."

For the fraction of a paralysed second Agnes thought her mother was going to kiss her father. Martha partly rose from her chair, and then relapsed.

"Sign the lease so you can't back out," she said. And then weakly, "I'm glad—I'm so glad——"

She choked, and relieved of the pressure of a great announcement, Henry proceeded to a secondary phase of the situation.

"I couldn't have you and Agnes go on this trip like hired hands," he said. "That counts too. Remember, you're not obligated to Lawson in any way. He's invited you, like he would anybody else, and you're not obligated. I hope you won't be sea-sick, either of you."

Martha was making notations on Divine Grace. Miracles had been started, and would gain impetus as they rolled.

"Isn't God upon the water just the same as on the land?" she inquired, not quite certain at the moment whether the comprehensive quotation was from her text-book or another branch of theology.

"I guess He is," Henry agreed leniently. "I guess He is."

CHAPTER V

Martha's tip on the divine marine presence was a good one. Not only was God on the waters, when they reached them, but He presided over the whole journey down from the mountains. Mr. Lawson did establish his guests at the Palace, utilising it as a starting point for expeditions that were even more satisfactory than the hotel. They saw shops and restaurants and parks and baths and drives. From San Francisco they journeyed to Los Angeles, and thence to San Pedro and the *Claribel*.

Martha endorsed the *Claribel* in every detail. Her endorsement extended to the ocean. The topography of the sea was perfect. Around the *Claribel* it was like a blue pasture.

Mr. Lawson wanted to allot her one suite of cabins and Agnes another, but she wouldn't let him be too generous.

"We like being together," she said. "And it will make less trouble for your servants."

Lawson had to let her have her way for the time being.

As though to the manner born, Martha left unpacking to a stewardess who seemed competent, and went on deck. Standing with Agnes beside her and Mr. Lawson beside Agnes, she meditated on the rewards of steadfast alliance with God. The cabin, sitting-room and bath occupied by herself and daughter were eminently agreeable. Lunch, served at the moment of coming aboard, had been sumptuous. Mr. Lawson prophesied a good hotel at the mills

in Oregon. " In my Father's house are many mansions," Martha quoted to herself as she watched the yellow reaches of California recede. Affection for the great boy bowing over Agnes revised her long-harboured blanket decision against men. There were men and men, she decided. One had to admit that some of them were lovable.

Lawson failed to reciprocate the wave of emotion she launched towards him. Fidgeting at her prolonged presence on deck, he used such subterfuges as he could command to be rid of her.

" What do you want to do now? " he asked with laborious high spirits, as though having brought Martha to sea for a good time, he was going to see that she had it. " Better go inside if you want to read. Glare's bad out here. Or if you don't want to go in, I'll have a chair turned facing the cabin wall for you. That's a good way, too."

The days in San Francisco and Los Angeles had been strenuous, and Martha felt tugs of yearning towards the luxuries of her own quarters. At heart she'd never cared much for scenery anyway.

" I think I'll lie down for a while," she said.

Lawson experienced a renewal of purpose.

" I'll have a boy show you around through all the cabins first," he said. " You came with me to rest up, and you'll do that better in a place by yourself. No sense you and the little lady bunking double——"

" Agnes and I are delighted with what we have now," Martha said sweetly.

Mr. Lawson was not entirely lacking in subtlety. He sized up the problem confronting him, and thought he could manage it.

" The boat's yours," he said. " I'm supercargo. That stewardess is yours, and you can have another one if you say the word. A pair of personal maids, as you might say."

Martha moved away in an aura of gratification. When she entered her room, a strong, white-uniformed girl looked

up from a suit-case and said " Madam." Garments had been hung in wardrobes. Others lay ready to be carried to some recess of the ship equipped with irons and pressing-boards. What a boy Mr. Lawson was ! What an adorable boy !

On deck the adorable boy ranged heavy artillery on Agnes as he had ranged it on her mother.

" How'd you like it if I had Claribel painted off the bow up there, and A-G-N-E-S on instead ? " he asked playfully.

In the new long skirt lined with silk, Agnes was trying to be a young lady. Young ladies weren't scared. They gave smart answers when men stooped too close, returning as good as was sent. Trying to think what a young lady would say when a man proposed to name his boat for her, she got nowhere and only succeeded in stuttering incoherences.

Mr. Lawson laughed and tucked a hand under her arm. Intent on acting like a young lady even if she couldn't talk, she let the hand stay.

" I might even give her to you." Lawson sidled closer. " What'd you think of a boat of your own ? "

Agnes could hardly hear as her whole attention followed Mr. Lawson's hand working up from her elbow.

" A boat of your own's the ticket," he breathed down upon her. " On a boat that's your own you can do blamed near what you please."

" Let's walk." The suggestion sort of yelled itself out. " You go ahead. No—I will ! " She pushed rudely in front. She had to, because behind she saw how long his arms were, and how they hung with heavy hands at the end of them like—like—— She couldn't remember what his hands were like.

Scuttering ahead, she stopped abruptly, remembering how kind Mr. Lawson had been to her, and her mother, and that she must be kind in turn. Fortunately objects at the bow of the ship offered excuse for stopping. In the broken water some half-dozen grey blobs leaped and plunged.

" Oh look ! " she exclaimed. " What in the world ? "

" Porpoises," Lawson said sullenly as he came up. She saw he was mad—and no wonder—the way she had acted. In order that he might not stay mad she let him take her elbow and finger a way towards her armpit. But when they came to the broad place on deck where lunch had been served, she plunged for a seat by herself. Lawson dragged a chair up.

" Your mother takes to this kind of life," he said.

" Wouldn't anybody ? "

" She likes me." He emphasised the initial pronoun.

" Doesn't everybody ? " That was better—more like a young lady. " Back home—I never heard anyone so praised——"

Lawson limbered and found her elbow again.

" I know about you," he rumbled. " You're a flirt. You know how to get men crazy. Catch'em and leave-'em. That's you. All hunky-dory with me so long as I sabe, eh ? "

Straining the supports of his chair, he leaned. She sat still. She made herself sit still. Lawson noted her immobility and read his own meaning into it. The little devil—and as pretty as a nectarine. He liked nectarines. Biting into them made his jaws ache, he liked them so much. Almost looked like he was in love. Swishing fluids ran through him when he touched her. What he felt, holding the unyielding elbow, was about high watermark in William Lawson's erotic history.

Earlier plans for guest quarters on the *Claribel* returned to him. The girls' mother was a nuisance that would have to be managed with skill—but nevertheless managed. If she proved too much for him in the matter of separate cabins, he'd see to it that she got off to bed early nights.

When finally Agnes jerked up from her chair and said she must see what her mother was doing, he let her escape without pursuit. Since it took better than three days to get up the coast, he felt he had plenty of time.

After dinner that night he re-opened attacks on Martha.

"Well?" he asked as jocosely as impatience would permit. "Changed your mind about a place to yourself?"

Stewards had removed the table from the deck. Agnes sat as far away as she could get in a shadow. She wore the powdery blue cloak over a white dress. A lantern moved along an arc struck by a mast in the night above her. Its light showed her sitting taut, holding her skirt down from the wind. Martha didn't have to hold her skirt. It hung like an iron casing. Lawson wondered how fast she'd sink in that skirt if she fell overboard. He wouldn't care how fast it was.

"Well?" he repeated when she didn't answer at once. "Quarters a little too snug? No use of that with all the room there is to spread around in."

Martha stirred.

"We're settled very nicely," she said.

"Settle again in two shakes," Lawson expanded hopefully. "You ought to see how the gangs I usually take on board shift. Nothing would do for a girl last trip but to move into the Captain's bunk. He got out first though."

"Agnes and I couldn't think of being inconsiderate."

Lawson recognised the adversary as a darned smart woman. Honourable intentions and no less were what she was up to. He'd been angled for enough to know bait when he saw it. But this bait—he looked at Agnes in the shadow—this bait was so darned much like one of those nectarines that made your jaws ache, and that you could never get enough of. Maybe the old lady'd get what she was after, just by hanging out. In which case—why not a honeymoon in advance?

"When you want to go in," he said, rousing, "I'll send word to have your lights turned on."

Still Martha didn't move. Knowing nothing of psychology he, notwithstanding, essayed an experiment in suggestion.

"Night air makes you sleepy." He yawned lengthily. When Martha was not infected he tried another tack.

" Play solitaire ? " he asked naïvely.

" I never learned."

" Come on in the saloon, and I'll fix you up with a table and teach you a game."

Martha withstood that onslaught also.

" The evening's too lovely to spend inside." She was sitting with shut eyes that closed out sea and sky, but he didn't know that. " Another time I would like to have you teach me, but just now I'm too comfortable here."

Agnes had been gathering courage to appropriate Mr. Lawson's hint and bring out a maidenly imitation of his yawn.

" M'm—I'm sleepy. May I go, Mama ? " she asked.

" Run along," was her mother's reply.

Lawson wanted to slay the dogged woman. Accompanying Agnes to her door, he brushed her skirts the way he did when he danced. Ashamed of the trick about being sleepy she made amends by letting him. She even put out a hand as though steadying herself. When he caught it a startling rearrangement of sensations took place in her. One department of her feelings detached itself from all the other parts, and sort of thrilled to his touch. If Mama had not been in sight, she might not have ducked and slammed the door between them when he tried to kiss her. It was a shutter door which locked. Agnes shot the bolt and stood inside suppressing short sharp gusts of laughter.

A whisper came to her.

" Slip out when she's asleep," it said. " I'll wait."

Agnes put her hand to her mouth to hold laughter down.

" Wait—just wait—and see if I come," she whispered back, and then appalled fell on her mother's berth and felt it pounding as her heart raced.

Thrills did not depart with Mr. Lawson when he left the door. After she was in bed she could still feel them, running up and down, up and down, where her skirt had been brushed and her arm grabbed. When her mother

came she pretended to be asleep. Martha considered the child's slumber and decided not to ring for the maid, though it was a pity not to. Complicated unhookings and untyings and the sag of springs told when she retired. Mr. Lawson paced the deck outside. Agnes enjoyed his persistent stealthy tread. It was fun having a man walk the floor for you when you had no intention of doing as he asked. It was the most fun she'd ever had.

Martha did not lie long awake. The steps that passed were probably a deck-hand. Water along the side of the ship made a low monotonous song. When a star pricked through the slats of the shutter door she drew the curtains of her berth, closing herself in with comfort.

It was broad daylight when she awoke to a discreet knock. Split by the shutter the sun made a sheaf of sabres on the wall. Slipping on a dressing-gown she admitted the maid and a steward with trays.

In his own quarters Lawson did not appreciate his breakfast as Martha did hers. Refusing all but a minimum of food he went out and forward and slumped down on a coil of rope. He was sore. Pounding a deck half a night wasn't what he liked best. He still sat on the coil of rope when, an hour later, his two guests, arm in arm, greeted him. Agnes saw his mood and wasn't so sure the night before had been fun after all. It looked as though it might have consequences.

" Come on," she tugged at her mother's arm in an impulse to run from trouble. " Come on—let's walk some more."

Martha paused to approve the day.

" What a glorious morning ! " she exclaimed. " We had a splendid night. I don't think Agnes knew a thing after her head touched the pillow."

" Well, I did," Lawson growled. " I knew plenty."

Agnes tugged again. It hadn't been fun after all. It was having consequences.

" Come——" she urged. " Come on—— Come."

Clinging to his injury, Lawson found it converted to self-pity. He had been badly treated, and he intended that his guests should see it. Martha misconstrued his mood, and reminded Agnes of all the preoccupations that troubled men of affairs.

The day passed dismally for Agnes. Mr. Lawson was mad again. What if he stayed mad, and wouldn't bring them back with him from Oregon? What if he even changed his mind about offices in El Stancias? There was Papa's lease on the Square to think of—and the way things had been at home lately.

By dinner time her punishment was more than she could bear. Lawson had worked up tremendous feeling for himself, and ate immersed in gloom. Was he the owner of the boat, he asked himself, or did it belong to the dame in the iron skirt and her unaccommodating youngster? If he had to take high-handed measures to regain supremacy, whose fault was it?

"Come up to the bridge," he said to Agnes as the stewards cleared. "It's windy, but I guess you can stand that." He threw in the wind for Martha's benefit. It was a preventive measure based on observation of her neat hair.

Agnes jumped. A chance had come to make up to Mr. Lawson.

"Run along," Martha agreed sweetly. "I'm happy here."

Agnes edged close to the wall, making room for Mr. Lawson beside her. He clumped behind.

"I'm sorry," she said over her shoulder. He stared past her. Climbing to the bridge she saw the Captain in the pilot house. Captain or no Captain, Mr. Lawson must be placated. There was getting home to think of, and the lease on the Square.

"Don't be cross," she pleaded, holding to the rail. "Please."

Wind whipped one of her braids loose and blew it across Mr. Lawson's face. Her cloak flew around him like

wings. He caught the braid and held it against her breast under the winged cloak.

" You're a nice one," he complained, and wedging the braid between her and himself, felt under the blowing cloak. " Either you know all there is—or you don't know beans."

" The Captain——" she glanced back.

" Captain's seen enough in his life so he's not interested any more."

The Captain had been an involunatry excuse that came out of itself. Now she had to hold excuses down and stand still while Mr. Lawson's fingers pressed, one by one, into the flesh of her arms as though feeling for bones. His anger seemed to leave him as his touch crept upward.

" Which is it ? " he muttered into her tumbling, lashing hair. " Do you know it all—or nothing ? "

" I don't know what you mean—really I don't." She couldn't bear his hands, but she had to bear them.

" Like fish don't know water—eh ? " he laughed.

" I've got to go—Mama——"

Excuses wouldn't be held down.

" Mama's out for the time being, see ? Answer me, cutey. All or nothing ? "

" Nothing—really—please——"

" You sure stand pat when you stand pat. You've got to know something. Don't you read books ? "

" I've read lots of books——"

" Go ahead—tell me about *Five Little Peppers and How They Grew.* I mean real books."

" They're real books. I've got to go. Honestly I've got——"

" Boccaccio ? Ever sneak Boccaccio into your room at night ? "

" I never heard——"

" All right—bluff ahead. I'll call and lend you old man Boccaccio so we can start from scratch."

" I'd be pleased, of course. Thanks. But——"

" Sure. What you're going to say now is that there's no place you can read alone. Fine. Fix that quick. Look around and pick out a cabin you like, and change."

" No."

His feeling of injury returned. Dropping her arm, he lurched away from the blowing cloak and down the companionway.

She raced after him, reckless of everything but his returning anger, and drew him into the shadow under the bridge.

" I—I haven't read that book," she panted. " It—it would be nice if you'd lend it to me."

He responded like a ball on a rubber string.

" And the other cabin ? " he asked.

" But I can't. Mama——"

" How'd you read then ? "

" Couldn't she see ? Do you mean she mustn't see ? "

" That's what I mean."

" But I—she draws her curtains—and I could draw mine."

He became an enthusiastic conspirator.

" Tell you what—you wait here—and I'll bring out a couple of books. See ? One's a blind. Put 'em both in your room, one out to show, and one hid. Read one till she goes to sleep—and the other after. Don't get too interested though—because I'll be waiting up to talk it over afterwards."

" But I can't. She'd hear me dressing."

" Don't dress. That's the best part. Don't."

" But——"

He was down the deck. She stood in the windless shadow, shaking. Returning he slid two volumes under her coat, and turning away with an appearance of indifference said, " Scoot."

Scuttering down the far side of the ship she crossed through a corridor. There was no one in the cabin, not even the maid. Sliding the volume with the red leather binding

and funny name under her pillow, she laid the other one out. Back in the corridor the pillow appeared as inadequate. She ran back and lifting the mattress of her berth, pushed the red book under and straightened the covers again. It had taken time and now she must hurry. Mama would wonder why she was away so long. Mr. Lawson was waiting at the entrance beyond. It was horrible what he had said about not dressing. Joking of course—but sometimes Mr. Lawson's jokes——

" Mama's waiting," she said weakly when she joined him. " We mustn't let Mama wait so long." She grasped his sleeve and pulled him along. The chair that stood alone by the mast was vacant. She sat down and spread her hands to keep down the ruffles of her dress.

Mr. Lawson began to talk.

" Miss Barnet thought she'd turn in early again to-night," he said to Martha. " So I got her a book to read. I'd have got one for you too—but you came on this trip to rest, and I'm going to see you do it, and not sit up nights straining your eyes."

" I brought some books," Martha said. " But I haven't looked into them yet. The reflection from the water is pretty strong."

Agnes' skirt blew up. She caught it and strained it down. Lawson yawned. Rising, he breathed deeply as though taking farewell of the night. Martha rose also, and thought what nice manners the dear boy had as he piloted her to her door.

Agnes trailed behind, but Lawson was aware of her. It beat all-get-out, he remarked to himself, how aware he was of that girl. Her blowing cloak was a cloud behind him, a cloud that he could still feel wrapping around him, as it had wrapped a while before.

Reminded of books, Martha took hers to bed. But she was sleepy. After all, things were coming nicely of themselves. Why force what was already started ? Putting them down, she held back her curtains.

"What have you there, dear?" she asked.

The shiver of the boat disguised the girl's trembling as she held out a brown volume. Martha was, if anything, far-sighted.

When Knighthood Was in Flower, she read between heavy eyelids.

"It sounds all right," she sighed, and pulled her curtains close.

Housed and content, she lay in thought for a while. There was no doubt of Mr. Lawson's interest in Agnes. Trust a mother to know. There certainly were men and men, and Mr. Lawson was one of the other kind. Agnes would never descend to the material depths into which Lettie had sunk. Principle was too well drilled into her for that. And Mr. Lawson wasn't a Walter Morgan. He was just a great, bounding, generous boy. Agnes liked him. She might not be in love with him—but remembering Lettie and Principle and a few other things, she was glad that Agnes wasn't in love. But she liked him—otherwise she would not have stayed so long with him on the bridge that night. It was perfectly proper for a girl to stay on a bridge at night with a captain just behind.

Through a slit in her curtains she could see the pyramid of bedclothes supported by Agnes' knees. The dear child. Martha closed the slit in her curtains and slept.

CHAPTER VI

Stealthy, lest gropings should be audible, Agnes got the hidden book. She held it between both hands for a while, feeling the smooth soft leather. It was like skin. It was like her own skin. There was perfume about it, musky and disquieting.

Bending the cover lightly she turned supple blank pages and came to a picture. The picture was like the binding and the pages—smooth and strange. It showed

people sitting under trees, listening to a young man who stood slim and straight in disturbing tights. The tights were different from those in Shakespeare. They had——

Passing the tights hastily, she began to read.

Mr. Lawson hadn't told her that the book was like other books except for music in the words of it. She listened to the music, line of it following line, like sounds that came to the street from the church where Maggie Doyle went.

The lines told of people coming together to pass the time while a dire plague ravaged their city. The young man of the picture was the story-teller. He told of a man who stole and lied and was made a saint for it.

She read on, turning pages rapidly and without sound. There was a story of a Jew who turned Christian. Another showed how a Jew had saved his wealth. There was a monk who——

Under her chest a lump formed, and then revolved. There were adventures of the monk that meant little—and yet meant everything.

The lump under her chest was one of those great, oncoming balls that roll up in dreams. It became what the monk thought and did. The monk's thoughts were thick, silent, rolling dreams. They were packed with meanings that no dictionary would give. Like an apparition Miss Dommit's blenched faced floated between Agnes and the book—and yet the words she read were not words scratched on the frosted glass of a wash-room.

Stiff against her pillows, Agnes read, her mind a convulsion of rejecting and absorbing. Unweaned to fact, it assimilated strong, untimely food and simultaneously tried to spew it out. Inside her sickened body, feelings followed the retching of her mind. They dropped through her torso, whirled back and added to the revolving lump under her chest.

Something hateful and loathsome, something that once having been taken in could never be put out, was becoming part of her. Pushing against an onslaught of knowledge,

fear and ignorance and horror galvanised the girl's limbs. Noiselessly, almost without motion, she slid from her bed, and watchful of any movement from her mother's curtains crept to the door, holding the book between thumb and finger like a decayed, crawling fragment.

The bolt in the shutter door slid without sound. In the darkness outside she saw the lighted end of a cigar elevate itself as though a smoker on the after deck had risen. With all the power she could command, she pulled her arm back and shot it forward. The book flew, dropped and made a black period on the starlit sea. The cigar end grew bright as it came forward. Falling back, Agnes shot the bolt of the door. Her mother's curtains did not move.

Chilled and motionless in bed she heard stealthy steps pause outside. They went from the door to the window and back again—moved and returned. Martha snored. Agnes' arms were stretched and bloodless down her sides. Her toes bent down like fingers. The lump in her chest revolved.

Outside, William Lawson grew huge with rage. If she thought she was going to keep him up all night again for nothing, she could think again. Playing him, was she? The damned girl! The God-damned girl!

In his room he poured a drink and set the bottle on the floor beside his bed.

CHAPTER VII

Concluding that fresh hot water was a tremendous and expensive luxury on shipboard, Martha revelled in it. Splashing like a bathing she-eagle, she took towels handed in by the maid, and spun a tap for Agnes.

"Late abed," she called cheerily, when the white uniform had gone for trays, "get up."

Agnes dragged herself out and stood swaying in her night-gown.

"What ails you?" Martha surveyed her daughter

critically. "Don't think you ought to be sea-sick, just because you're on a boat. Look outside. That water is like glass."

"I'm all right," Agnes said.

"Then look as though you were. When a person is having everything in the world done for them, the least——"

Agnes retreated to her bath. Letting the tap run and pulling the stopper made noise enough to shut out Martha's discourse. When the maid knocked, she took the wrapper and turning to the mirror saw that stewing in hot water had brought colour to her face.

Her palate refused food, but when her mother threatened to resume her catalogue of a guest's duties, she stuffed some down.

"Maybe I'll go back to bed," she suggested feebly, faced with steps of dressing and going out. "I don't feel very good."

"You'll do nothing of the kind." Martha hooked a collar with cruel bones high behind her ears. "What you need is air. Get some clothes on."

Agnes wondered if she need dress, since, rather than face Mr. Lawson outside she would fling herself after the book that had drowned the night before. But Martha was stern. When Agnes said she couldn't find her stockings, the maid was ordered to find them. When the girl's hair was badly done, her mother ordered her to do it over.

Following her mentor into the sunlight, clean winds blew upon her, and a revelation of the essential health of the universe dissolved her illness and blew it away.

"I feel fine now," she said. "But let's not talk to Mr. Lawson just yet. Let's walk—you and I——"

Martha covered a smile. The dear child was as transparent as glass. Forward, Lawson glowered from his coil of rope. He was transparent also. Yesterday she had attributed business anxieties to him. To-day she was more acute.

" I'll go back where the chairs are," she said adroitly. " Run along and make a pretty speech to your host."

" No ! I can't—I'd——"

" Do as I say," Martha ordered, and turned aft.

Agnes gripped the rail for support. If the book were as clean as the morning wind had wiped it, how explain what she had done ?

Morose on his ropes, Lawson found his grouch dividing into several opinions. One dubbed the girl a fool, another contended she was too darned smart, and still another took the form of emotion. She had no business to be standing there, looking as though she hadn't a friend in the world, and needed one. What did she want to look so young for ? Maybe he shouldn't have given her that book. Just because the mother was a war-horse was no reason the girl was too.

Leaving his seat under the stress of unfamiliar remorse, he greeted her as best he could. Wide, terrified eyes held him off.

" Wait ! " The hand that wasn't on the rail went up to her throat. " I've got to tell. First of all—I've got to tell—I flung it away—your book—I flung——"

Tenderness expired.

" Flung—— ? " he demanded. " What in the name of——"

" Overboard—I threw it away."

" You threw——" he had an impulse to shake her until those staring blue eyes closed and stayed closed. " You little —say, do you know that book cost three hundred dollars ? "

Bleak dismay wiped out the health of wind and sky for Agnes. She had thrown three hundred dollars away !

Sensible to the cost of things himself, Lawson saw what mention of three hundred dollars had done. The kid was scared of money. A new chance had come to shine in splendid munificence.

" Don't let that worry you," he apologised largely. " Plenty more three hundreds where that came from. I know a chap who deals in unexpurgated—smuggled——"

"I had to throw it away!" Her defence was watery, and she beat upon the rail to give it emphasis. "I had to—it—it——"

"Sure." He liked to see her abject, and patted the fist on the rail. "Glad you did. Shows the kind of girl you are. These days a man has to use brains to find out what kind of girl——"

"I had to," she repeated senselessly. "It—it—— Maybe it was I who was wrong and not the book—but I had to——"

"Sure," said Mr. Lawson. "Sure. I know."

Under his paw her hand dragged involuntarily, and then lay still. She couldn't stop thinking, though, of three hundred dollars thrown away. Staring across the dancing waste of the Pacific she felt the awful significance of three hundred dollars. Papa white-faced over bills—Mama screaming—and here was she throwing three hundred dollars away.

Ill-humour effaced itself entirely from Lawson. He'd spent that amount and more, a good many times, and got less for it than he was getting now. The kid was all used up. Blamed if he didn't like her too well for his own comfort.

Recollections of forbidding closed doors recurred to him. If he was ever going to get through them, he'd have to be helped. Of course this youngster hadn't what you'd call social position, but she looked like she had, and looks counted. By the same token neither had his bungalows been houses, but they had looked like houses, and he'd put them over on the public and cashed in the wad he wanted.

Naturally, the smart thing to do would be to marry one of the girls already inside those doors. But how could you—with the world swarming with Klondikers, and men in top hats wanting to see your pedigree before they gave you a chance at their women-folks? Talk with you—yes. Slap you on the back and close deals with you. But never a word about coming along home to dinner. What good did it do

you to buy all the boxes for a show and fill them with your friends, if that other kind of folks sat down below, and didn't look, unless it was like they were looking at a menagerie?

This girl, now, didn't look like part of a menagerie, and never would. Having reached that desirable conclusion, Mr. Lawson's natural predilection for beauty adorned ran riot and proceeded to imagine her as nearly like part of a menagerie as it would be possible to make her. He thought that if you'd take what she had in the way of looks, and dress it up right, and hang a couple of quarts of diamonds on it—diamonds, not pearls—— He'd never been able to see why real money was paid out for pearls. That was another thing that made him see red when he sat in a box and those others looked up, curious and amused, from down below. They wore pearls. By God, give him something to wear them, and he'd cram diamonds down their throats, and make them like them.

"Your folks?" A question rose from his meditations. "Where'd they come from?"

The query jarred some of Agnes' distress away.

"They've always been there—where we are. Both my grandfathers—and theirs——"

"Pretty good standing, old mountain stock has. All it needs is management to get the best there is."

Jolting down from the best, his calculations fell into a more accustomed rut. When folks planned to marry anyway—— A ship with a pretty girl on it was no place to wait.

"We've wiped out the book, see?" He felt between the lifeless fingers on the rail. "It's *peluk*—gone—nothing—as they say in Nome. Forget it."

"I'll try," she said gratefully.

She did try, but she couldn't. Relief and gratitude were so great that, as the day passed, they reacted in unlikely, hysterical ways. She wanted to repay him for his goodness. She wanted to amuse him—to run and laugh and be caught and run again. Muscular ripples of excitement

coursed under her skin. Languor merged with excitement. It was thick, drugged languor, like muffled drums beating in her veins. She wondered whether, if her mother weren't there, something delirious might not occur. When it was evening, and stewards had cleared the table, she lay in a long chair without bothering to hold down her skirt.

Lawson saw the fluttering muslin, and rising, paced back and forth. Martha also saw it, and laid a rug across her daughter's knees.

Lawson observed the rug, and rendered tribute where tribute was due. Wise old lady. When she went into a fight, she didn't overlook any points. If Napoleon had had her on his side, whoever it was that licked him would be running yet. One thing the old girl didn't know though, was that the battle was almost won. If he stayed in the mind he was, he'd marry her kid when the boat docked in Oregon. Better to marry than burn, he'd read somewhere.

Philanthropy exercised agreeably in the morning over a three hundred dollar book, spilled now in the direction of the dame in the iron skirt.

" Last night aboard," he said, bringing his peregrinations to a halt. " How about celebrating ? Steward—get us some glasses and a bottle of champagne."

Watching the steward speed away, Martha took out a well-worn prejudice and renovated it. Champagne wasn't liquor. Liquor was what Henry stopped in at Geiger's for, or The Elite, or other low places. Wine was one of the fruits of the earth, a product of God's abundance, designed for his children.

" That would be very nice," she said.

Lulled to begin with, Martha felt even more lulled after two glasses of the fruits of the earth. Her confidence in Mr. Lawson transcended itself. He was such a great, bounding, adorable boy. Leaving Agnes with him would be leaving her with a protector.

" I think, if you children will excuse me," she said, " I'll go in."

Os

Stunned by his luck, Lawson was not too stunned to press it. Almost affectionately he helped Martha to her room.

" I got sleepy all of a sudden," she apologised.

" Sure," he said. " Sure." And closed the door softly upon her.

Agnes' first impulse had been to run after her mother. But she'd thrown away an inordinately expensive book, and maybe Mr. Lawson wanted her to stay. There was a new moon that night. The clogged drumming in her veins went on. Half-reclining, half-sitting, she relaxed to it and closed her eyes to feel the drift of light around her.

" Romantic—all this." Lawson dragged up a chair, and extended his hand as though the moon were his and he had made it. " You didn't drink your wine ? "

" A little. I didn't like it much. It made my tongue sting."

" Let's see." He leaned close.

She shut her mouth tight and turned away to laugh.

" Having a good time ? " he asked.

" Yes."

" Maybe the old town won't look like all there is when you get back to it. Well, let's don't cry over that. Maybe you'll never have to see it again."

Her head came around sharply. What was the matter now ? Was he too tired of her and her mother to bring them back from Oregon ? Had he changed his mind about the timber and the mills and headquarters ?

Lawson saw her start, and hitched his chair.

" I mean—you're boss now," he said thickly. " Feel my face. Burning up. Feel—put your own up."

He put his down instead. She let it rest against her cheek for a moment. Stinging, shivering excitement ran along her nerves. She pressed her head back, away from the heat of his.

" Gracious—ain't we shy ? No use in that now," he said gutturally. " I'm hooked. All that's left to do is to hire a preacher."

Agnes knew of nothing to say, and so said nothing.

Languor and excitement were warring drugs in conflict within. She could hear the clamour they made, and the slip of water along the side of the boat, and Mr. Lawson's breath.

" Land to-morrow afternoon." He drew away a little. " Run up the coast from daylight on and then into the harbour. You'll like my docks. They line one whole side of Goose Bay, off the inlet, with the plant and the town back of them. How'd you like to have a line of docks and some mills and the best part of a town for your own ? "

" I—I like mills," she answered.

" I've done a good bit in my life, one way and another," he said expansively in the direction of the moon. " And seen a good bit too. Men, women—plenty of women——" A glance slipped to her as he said that. No good letting a chit of a girl think she was all there was.

Agnes moved restlessly. She hadn't thought of that before. Phalanxes of women presented themselves, drawn up in formation against her. In her clouded, foggy way she hadn't thought clearly what it was she wanted of Mr. Lawson. She didn't actually come to any clean-cut point now. All she knew was that unnumbered women were against her, and she must do what she could to save the store on the Square, and the headquarters in El Stancias. Competition added an element to the welter of sensations in which she foundered.

" Yeah," Lawson drawled. " Plenty of women. But can't say I ever met just the ticket before."

Excitement, languor, and competition murmured in general amnesty. Moon and stars descended. Agnes lay drowning in fluids that washed her tissues apart and ripped through the fabric of her bones. Her toes bent as they had bent the night before. Her hands wanted to reach out and touch and hold. When Lawson leaned close, goose-flesh pricked close under her hair at the back. Leaning farther he pressed her against the outer arm of her chair. It screeched and a screw tore away. The sound of the

screw was a high, thin cry in the pulsing of muffled thunder.

" What ails me is—I'm in love." Lawson's face found hers. His hands were hidden by the rug but she could feel their weight. They were on her knees. They rested on both her knees.

" I'm in love." The words went in her ear and down the ducts leading from her ear. " And I want you—I want you bad."

The broken chair-arm gave. She strained even farther against it. Through the sucking, pulling tide that washed in and around her, she was conscious of the hands on her knees. They were heavy hands—at the ends of long arms——

Clutching at a finger of one of them she got it away. It returned, and crept upward over the stuff of her dress. The moon flew back to place, and the man's shadow blotted it out.

" Don't— oh, don't ! " She fought the creeping hand. The other left her knee and was under the ruffle at her neck.

" Don't ! " she pleaded. " Don't ! I'll call——"

" Who ? What about ? What would you say if your mother came and asked you what about ? Listen——"

" Don't ! " She clawed at the ruffle to stop the hand beneath.

" Listen ! " Out of his chair and weighting hers, he mumbled into her open, frantic mouth. " This is the way things are. Don't you know this is the way things are ? "

" Please— oh, please ! " Forgetful of the hand she pushed against his mouth.

" I'm going to marry you," he wheezed through her fingers. " Sabe ? We're going to be married anyway. There's a parson in the town back of the mills. We'll get him when we land. No harm done, if we're going to be married so quick——"

" Please—oh, please ! " She couldn't stand his teeth against her hand. They were moist and bony, like the

teeth of a skull that had lain in the rain. She clawed through the ruffle again.

" To-morrow—sabe ? To-morrow he'll marry us. What's the difference between to-night and to-morrow night. I want——"

The shrieking chair gave way. Lawson's weight catapulted him across it to the deck. He lay sprawling. Falling closer and straighter, Agnes found her feet. She was up and away—flying into the wind that split backward from the boat's prow. She was at the cabin door, and inside. She was away from the creaking chair and creeping hand—safe behind a bolt.

In her curtained berth Martha slept sonorously.

Cabined, secure, guarded by her mother's slumber, Agnes grasped the tumbled ruffle at her neck. Drumming, muffled thunder began to pulse again. Little bells jangled along her nerves. Safe, she returned in thought to her peril. Running from it she escaped, returned, ran and escaped once more. The madness of pursued nymphs was hers. Outside Lawson's feet were the hoofs of a faun.

" What's the matter ? " Martha parted her curtains drowsily. " What do you want to stand there doing nothing for ? "

" I—just came in." Agnes clipped her voice with her teeth to keep back chatters of laughter.

" Then go to bed." Martha drew her curtains.

In the bath-room Agnes let her garments fall. There was a mirror along one wall that reached to the floor. Always before she'd just seen her head—or held up a towel——

CHAPTER VIII

If Martha carried a hang-over next morning it was a salubrious one. Much as she favoured the sea, there was something also to be said for land. High, blue escarpments of coast rose in the distance before water that might have

been put up on hair-pins the night before, it was so properly crimped. At noon the nose of the *Claribel* shifted east and steam was up towards an indentation in the shore. It was Mr. Lawson's shore. Martha granted him that as she had granted him the sea.

Agnes had refused to get up, and Martha had been too laved by harmonies to insist. When Lawson appeared an hour before luncheon she moved towards him magnanimously.

Lawson was more solemn than glum. The night had been a disappointment to him in one way—in another it had done something queer to his mind and what he supposed was his heart. He felt sort of—as you might say—humble.

Unsnapping two folding-chairs he set them in a nook.

" Sit down, ma'am," he said to Martha. " We ought to talk."

" Three of the happiest days of my life——" she started to soliloquise as she sat.

" Glad you've had a nice time," Lawson cut in.

" Haven't we all ? Agnes, the dear child——"

" Look here," Lawson jerked his stool, " that girl of yours is—different from other girls. She does something to me. I guess it's that—I want us to get married."

The starched bosom of Martha's shirt-waist was no more rigid than her heart for a second. Then both bosom and heart swelled and fell.

" But——" she gasped. " But—she's just a little girl——"

Lawson's inexplicable docility continued.

" I mean—if she'll have me," he said.

His humility touched her.

" It's only—she's all I've got. And a baby, really. There's never been a man before——"

" I wouldn't be talking to you, if I thought there'd ever been another man—in any way that counted."

A hidden stratum of ice rose in Martha's consciousness. Misgivings about the Michelson boy, long submerged, floated again.

" No girl was ever watched and cared for better than Agnes has been by her mother," she said, as much for her own sake as his.

" I can see that," Lawson conceded.

Ice melted and trickled away. Nevertheless Martha waited for him to speak next, to give her a lead away from the menacing subject. Instead of speaking, he immersed himself in thought and snapped his big finger-joints.

Martha thought a discourse on Agnes' integrity might help both of them.

" Agnes and I have been more than the usual mother and daughter," she said. " I've had her every thought and confidence. I know it isn't the modern way—but I've kept her from the things that children often pick up. She knows nothing at all of what is called life."

Lawson looked up and blinked, rather pathetically. It was as though, dimly, he glimpsed a kind of light.

" I like that," he said submissively. " With all the muck there is about—if there's one girl—— What I want to say is, that no matter what a man has been, he'd like the girl he marries——"

Martha's soul went out to him.

" I've always wanted a son," she said. " Before Agnes came, I thought she was going to be a son. If she had been, I would have wanted her to be like you."

She looked toward the shore, and the mill smoke fogging the air above the inlet.

Lawson smiled, almost boyishly.

" She's pretty good at what she is," he said. " She's got all the tricks a woman needs. Leads a man on, and then runs."

Martha smiled too.

" That's girl nature. Any fairly nice-looking girl leads a man on just by being nice-looking and a girl. It's the fact that Agnes runs which matters."

" Sure ! " Lawson waxed jocose. " That's what gets us

poor men. Well, I'm a man, and I'm got. I want us to be married, here at the mills, when we land."

"Here at the mills!" It was too much for Martha. For a moment Lawson wondered if big, strong women fainted. Gathering herself, Martha fought for time. "But it's so sudden. Men don't fall in love as quickly as that. Or if they do, they wait to see if they are going to stay in love."

"Do they? Well, I don't. Everything I've ever done has been done sudden. I'm like that. How long did it take me to look over that timber back of your town and say I wanted it? How long did I mull over it before I asked your old man to be my manager in El Stancias? Oh, I know he had a place of his own, and wouldn't, but that's neither here nor there. I didn't hang around for a couple of weeks, did I, before telling you I wanted you to come on the *Claribel*? Why didn't I? Because the first time I ever saw that girl of yours, riding so pretty beside the Governor in the parade, I knew I'd never seen anything better and never would. She's—she's a lady—that girl is. And pretty damned few ladies come a man's way, nowadays."

Martha wondered if she was going to cry. His abasement hurt her.

"But I couldn't——" She fought for time. "My little girl! She hasn't even any clothes."

"Who cares about clothes?"

Martha cared about clothes. Besides, now that her turmoil was abating, various considerations presented themselves. Mr. Lawson mustn't get the idea that he was being snapped up. No matter how fine a man might be, being snapped up gave him an advantage that no male should have.

"Any girl is entitled to clothes, and to a wedding," she said. "Didn't Agnes say she wanted a wedding?"

"She didn't say anything. I told you she ran."

"Well, I want a wedding," Martha said, and mentally marshalled the whole of El Stancias before her, to eat the

dust of its long condescensions and longer forgetfulness. "A girl's home town means something to her."

"Now look here, Mrs. Barnet, the preacher at the mills——"

"No."

Lawson's attack of boyishness and humility had been fleeting, mere dim gropings of impulses that had surprised him by their appearance. He wasn't often bothered by outcroppings of better nature, William Lawson wasn't. Usually he knew exactly what he wanted, and got it when he wanted it. He dealt in the material and tangible, and intimations that she also dealt in the material and tangible, led him to believe he could handle Martha Barnet.

"Delays are no good," he said meaningfully. "I've won pots on a pair of sixes because the other fellow looked his three aces over so long he lost his nerve to bet on them. Give a girl time to cry a few times over an old beau, and you're a goner. I don't mean anything wrong—but sometimes that girl of yours acts like she'd been courted before. She's as you might say, half-awake already."

Grinning, the phantom face of Eddie Michelson rose before Martha. Had she ever been sure about those hours in Doyle's lot?

"You're a married lady," Lawson continued, "and I can talk facts to you. Half-awake isn't bad—but when it comes to more than half, either it'll be me that does it, or I quit. Taking her home, and giving some lump of a boy a chance to get at her again, don't appeal to me."

Out of all the chaos into which the world had whirled, Martha could grasp just one certainty. Eddie Michelson was gone, and must stay gone. No questionings must ever bring confessions regarding him from Agnes to Mr. Lawson.

To get to her feet it was necessary to steady herself against the wall.

"There's no one," she said, "who could possibly—— But I'll go in and talk to her."

Arriving at the cabin she sat down immediately because the room swam dizzily, and she had no breath.

" So, you're up at last ! " she said with a brave show of airiness.

Sitting on the floor, Agnes was lacing a shoe.

" Mother has something to say to you," Martha gathered speed and direction.

Agnes hitched instinctively towards the sitting-room and escape. The all-probing mind knew about the night before and was proceeding towards punishment.

" Sit still," Martha ordered.

" Can I wear my slippers ? " Agnes broke out feverishly. Deflecting purposes wasn't one of her accomplishments, but she had to try. " It won't be wet ashore. Can I wear my slippers ? "

" Come here, now. Closer. Put your head here."

The knee indicated might have been a guillotine, but Agnes hunched crab-wise towards it obediently.

" I couldn't help——" she moaned. " I didn't go—like with Eddie. You left me——"

" We won't talk of Eddie." Martha stroked the obedient head austerely. " Never, under any circumstances, will either you or I speak of him to anyone—ever. What is gone and demonstrated away is as though it had never been."

" I couldn't help——"

The stroking hand grew softer.

" We have something really serious, this time, to talk about. Mr. Lawson wants to marry you."

It didn't mean anything particularly to Agnes except that danger was passed. Nothing could have surmounted the passing of danger in importance. Her head slumped, heavy with relief, on the supporting knee.

" That's better." Martha stroked. " A little girl and her mother, discussing the most important thing that will ever occur to either of them—that's what we are now, dear. I know you don't understand about love——"

Memories, long imprisoned, broke their chains at that.

Agnes did know about love. It came and soiled and smirched you until you were unfit to look your father in the face.

"You can't know about love." Martha emphasised the negative. "Women don't really. They're not like men."

Agnes burned. That was the shame of it! Women should not be like men, but in Doyle's lot she had known what Eddie knew, felt what Eddie felt. She had listened as he had listened to the high, clear cry of the oriole across a disc of blue that covered a cylinder of green.

"I can give you to Mr. Lawson," Martha crooned, "and suffer grief only for my own loss of you, knowing that your life will never be what mine has been. Everything that a man can give to a woman will be lavished upon you. Marriage is not to be entered into lightly. If you had talents, and the opportunity to develop them, I might wish that you should not marry at all. That would be the ideal. But much as I have done for you in other ways, I have been unable to provide you with means to care for yourself, and life is long and hard for a woman alone, with no outstanding accomplishments. Even your Aunt Lettie has, perhaps, done better for herself——"

"But—— But——" Relieved and relaxed, Agnes' apprehensions began to grasp what her mother said.

"You don't need to think of that. The man who asks for you is not like the man who took your Aunt Lettie. He's a boy. A great, generous, impulsive boy. Why——" Martha laughed nervously. "Why—he even proposed that you should be married immediately—when the boat reaches the mills."

"No!" Agnes shot her head away from the stroking hand. Scrambling and hitching, she backed, the starch of her petticoat crackling on the floor. "No!"

"I said the same thing," Martha laughed reassuringly. "I told him there was your trousseau to think of."

"I want to see Papa first." Crouching, Agnes called upon help that was not there.

" Certainly we'll consult your father. We'll see that Mr. Lawson gets no idea we're overlooking the formalities."

" It isn't a formal—it isn't that. I've got to talk to Papa. I've got to tell him about Eddie——"

" Hush, child, hush ! If little girls have talking to do they come to their mothers."

" I've got to ask Papa about lo——"

" Girls don't talk to their fathers of that."

" Why ? " It was full-voiced defiance.

" Because they don't—that's why."

The sweet brown head came down on slender, perched-up knees. Agnes rocked and cried. Martha went to her and knelt and took her in her arms.

" There," she murmured. " There, there, there. Such a little girl, remembering a little boy beau who never really meant anything and must be forgotten now. Just a baby, afraid to step over the line to womanhood when there really is no line."

" But lo—I don't lo——"

Agnes strangled against the ample bosom.

" Of course you don't," Martha comforted. " How could you ? Love, if you want to call it that, comes after marriage —not before."

" How does it ? Tell me, Mama—Mama, tell me how."

" When a man does everything for a woman she is grateful."

" You mean that—Mr. Lawson buying clothes for me——"

" I think we may call him William now—don't you ? "

Agnes crept out of the encircling arms and got her slippers. Martha returned to her chair. Taking a strong pin from her hair she handed it to the child on the floor to use as a button-hook.

Agnes was trying to think. If feeling—right feeling—came after a girl married, why hadn't her mother and her father—— The answer was, of course, that her father hadn't been able to do the things that made a woman grateful.

Crazily, a hat she had seen in San Francisco, jigged into Agnes' mind. If Mr. Lawson bought her that hat, she'd be grateful and feel right. When she was grateful about the book, hadn't she wanted him to follow her on the boat? There'd be more than a hat and a book if she married him. There'd be dresses, and more hats, and maybe even jewellery. Why, she had much to be grateful for already. Papa's store on the Square was really, if you came down to it, a present from Mr. Lawson. And she felt right about that. She felt right, all through her, about the store on the Square.

"But not when the boat lands," she decided aloud, still worrying a slipper button with the hair-pin. "You tell him, Mama, it can't be right off when the boat lands."

"I have told him." Martha wished her chair were a rocker. Rocking would be pleasant now. "I said every girl deserved a wedding."

Mention of a wedding seized Agnes' imagination. She saw a white satin dress with a train, flowers and a veil. Stella's jealous eyes would be like pointed jet beads. Spinning out from a wedding and a wedding dress and the envy of friends, enchantments began to cast a spell over Agnes.

"But——" she still protested. "But——"

"Ever since you were born," Martha chanted in the voice of a dreamer, "I've worked and prayed for just one thing. Life cheated me, but if my child could be happy I knew I should find full payment for all my sufferings in that."

"You want me to—Mama—you want me to——" Agnes couldn't finish the question. The word to finish it was hard to say. The word both meant something and meant nothing at all. If only she could discover what it meant—or didn't mean. And there was the white satin dress to consider, and Stella's pointed eyes, and happiness for Mama—at last—after long years.

"If William were anything but what he is," Martha

continued in the same bewitched and dreaming voice, "I would not have come to you, dear, as I have come now. You know that. Your mother doesn't need to tell you that her love for you comes first, before everything else in the world. He's so splendid—he's everything I could ever have wished. He can give you the world, dear—the world to hold in your hand. It's what I've wanted and prayed for. All of the old desires that troubled me for so long have passed over to you. I don't want much for myself now—only for you. I'd be happy, knowing you were happy and that the labour and hardship of my life had at last come to fruit. I'd be happy knowing you were happy. Your father—your father and I would be happy together—because of you."

"But—but—if even afterwards I shouldn't feel right——"

"I wouldn't want you to be eager now," Martha went on. "How could you be? A woman's trust in a man comes when they're alone together—when she's dependent on him and he's kind. It begins when she stands beside him, and foreswearing all else cleaves only to him, and knows that he will never fail her."

Bending to her slipper, breathing only with her throat because there was nothing below with which to breathe, Agnes saw herself, white in her bridal gown, standing beside Mr. Lawson as all the world that she had known receded and left her nothing but him.

"You're sure?" she asked. "You know—for sure—that I'd feel——!"

"How could you help it? A man like William——"

Pushing weakly up from the floor Agnes dropped the ruined hair-pin in a basket, and getting into her dress spoke under the tent of the skirt.

"And you?" she questioned through mufflings of silk and cloth. "You said—that you and Papa—together——"

"Your happiness would be ours—together," Martha answered.

"Then you tell him——" Slim arms emerged from the

waist-band, and afterward a face flushed and quivering and damp. " Then you tell him—yes."

" Turn around. I'll fasten you up. There." Martha kissed the girlish shoulder blades above the starched bulge of the corset-cover. " But we won't let him hurry us. I'll say you want a wedding and clothes. You're entitled to them. And about the other matter—the one we spoke of first. It's done with and gone. Remember that. It's as though it had never been, and one doesn't speak—ever—of what has never been."

All at once the mother found her throat clotted with sobs. She went out hastily, and found that the air from the shore refreshed her. It was pungent with the balsam of pine and fir, and sweetly acid of new-cut wood. There was smoke from Mr. Lawson's mills. She breathed deeply to get the smell of smoke.

When the door closed on her mother Agnes sat down on her rumpled berth. Her face felt big and unfamiliar. It was puffy and wet. Aside from that she wasn't conscious of much.

Just before lunch was called, Martha knocked on William Lawson's door and was admitted to his cabin. He stood between her and a glassed case of books.

" It's as I told you," she said. " Agnes is not to be hurried. She wants to be married properly, at home, with her friends around her."

" But——"

" One thing that is not done, William is to hurry a girl about her wedding. If she's ever a free agent in her life, it's in the matter of her wedding."

" I told you I didn't think much of delay. Delaying is not my way. When I see what's got to be done, I do it. If I was the dallying kind, I wouldn't have said anything about getting married yet, at all. I'd have dawdled around, wondering this and that, and finally backed out."

" I don't think you'll back out," Martha said confidently.

" No—maybe not." Appraising his antagonist, he

acknowledged himself beaten. " That's the hell—I beg your pardon, ma'am—that's the deuce of it. She's got me. She's what I want, as far as I can see now. I've made the rounds, as you might say, in my time, but the girls I could have had for the asking, never filled the bill. I'm ambitious in more ways than money. Money's not so good, nowadays, with the Klondike and Nome spilling millionaires like an old hen scratching chicks out of a box. I want——"

He was pathetic again, and Martha was touched.

" You're everything I would have asked in a son," she said.

Lawson blustered to cover his lapse.

" I don't like delay. And if any lump of a kid——"

Martha drew a long breath, and played daringly.

" You've got to wait, William," she said. " A girl is simply not to be rushed. And there's no boy. I've talked to Agnes."

Lawson measured her, and quailed.

" Well then—are we engaged ? " he asked moodily.

" Mr. Barnet must be consulted."

" I'm asking you—are we engaged ? "

" I suppose so. But it won't hurt any of us to be patient."

" Look here—I've got a right to have the day set, so I'll know. And I want to get a ring—back in San Francisco. I'd feel surer if I'd got a ring."

" The day is for you and Agnes to decide."

To himself Lawson said, " Like hell it is." To Martha he was more diplomatic.

" You've got a present coming, too," he said ; " I like buying jewellery. Back in San Francisco, you come along with me to the Diamond Palace and take your pick."

" I've done without so long, I'm afraid I haven't many desires left for myself, aside from comfort," Martha said a little wearily.

" Well, you're going to have comfort from now on," Lawson expanded. " And a breast-pin besides."

She kissed him tremulously, maternally.

" My wonderful boy," she said, and then had to go because tears dampened her eyes.

In the cabin she found Agnes dressed for lunch.

" The poor darling fought so hard for his wedding at the mills," she sighed. " I had to be very firm. Finally I said that he could get a ring when we were back in San Francisco."

Agnes rose to the glittering spinner of a ring. It would be a diamond—a big one. Stella would nearly die.

Peace clothed Martha. Peace past all understanding. Cloud upon cloud, it wrapped her round.

" You're sure you want to be married ? " Peace was so dense that she had the courage even to put the question straight.

" Yes, I'm sure," Agnes said. And then : " But you keep me sure, Mama—you keep me sure."

" I will. It's time to go to lunch."

Mr. Lawson made being engaged amazingly easy. He was different than he'd ever been. As soon as lunch was over and Martha went away, he didn't try to get her elbow or anything. He seemed kind of afraid of her—as though she'd given him a lesson he remembered. He talked of stones. Stones, it seemed, were diamonds.

" Mean something—diamonds," he said. " Made up my mind to strike out and get rich one day when a buyer came to the place I worked and flashed a tie-pin. It looked to me by the tie-pin that he had the world by the tail. And that was how I was going to have it too."

Agnes saw life as a screaming cat whirled round and round by a howling urchin. Disquieting as the picture was, she preferred it to references to the night before. Being engaged wasn't hard.

" Diamonds and women stand for facts," Lawson discoursed. " When you come down to it there are just two facts. One's walking high with nobody above you, and the other's——" He glanced at her and then down at his own

hand. " Now this." He turned his ring. " Each stone a carat and three-quarters, and it's all I can pack. A man has to hang the real fireworks on his wife."

The word stopped the cat that was the world from whirling before Agnes. She was going to be a wife.

Oregon stood close and clear beside the moving boat. It was a bluish, hazy country that changed to green as you looked. A wife was one who was grateful because everything was done for her that could be done. The boat was turning into an inlet. Above the inlet smoke hung thick and dark. A wife liked someone because she was grateful."

" I'd better go in," she said in the midst of explanations about carats and blue-white. " We'll be landing soon." Her legs wobbled as she went.

Martha was in the sitting-room while the maid packed in the cabin.

" Close the door," she said to Agnes. " Come here. Is my little girl happy ? "

Agnes dropped and clung to the firm knee.

" Don't let me get scared," she whimpered. " Mama—don't let me get scared."

" I won't."

" If anything makes a difference to me—don't let it. Promise me—promise that you won't let——"

" I promise."

" I mustn't go back on what I've done. Don't let me ever go back on what I've done."

" I won't."

Peace, deeper than rivers, was over Martha Barnet and in her heart.

On the way from the dock in the company 'bus, Lawson said that the hotel was a good one. He said it had to be, as he stayed in it himself.

The Barnets were assigned two rooms with a bath between. Martha took the luxury placidly. Life was behaving itself towards her at last.

" Want the maid from the boat ? " Lawson inquired.

" No." Having a maid at command, one could dispense with her without a twinge. " Somehow—I'd rather be alone. It's more restful, in a way. I haven't rested much in my life, and now——"

" You're the doctor," Lawson conceded. " Settle in and do what you please. I've got an errand I want to do. There's a store here—not Andrews' or Shreves'—but it'll do in a pinch."

He went, and came back, and opened a box, and snapped a bracelet, and held it towards Agnes. It was the most bewildering thing she'd ever seen. Made of thick gold links with rubies on every outer surface. it was fastened with a diamond studded padlock shaped like a heart.

She swung it around and around on her arm. She wore it to bed and woke to feel it making dents in her cheek. Martha looked on with blessings in her fine grey eyes.

The bracelet opened a new era for Agnes. Its flashings got in her blood. She knew now why one felt right when one was grateful. She danced and played around the new, subdued Mr. Lawson—keeping at a distance, however. Martha tolerated her child's antics lovingly. Agnes had always needed higher spirits, and now she had them. Even Mr. Lawson was amused in a solemn, uneasy way.

Having made up his mind to wait, or rather having had his mind made up for him, he was waiting. And the girl seemed to have ginger. She didn't pay great attention to his mills, but she was used to lumber, so he couldn't find much fault with that. Anyway, he liked her ginger.

In his own blundering way he became as kind as Martha. He wondered at himself. It must be because she was so pretty, and so damned young. Younger, he guessed, than anybody had ever been before.

Unconsciously, even a little wistfully, perception peered out through the curtain of his flesh, and glimpsed things it had never known, and never would understand, and presently, perhaps, forget. If she kept on playing around,

and showing ginger, and didn't make him mad, everything would be great. Half-awake already—and so damned young !

Seeing his gentleness, Martha's love enveloped her son that was to be. She was even sorry for him. She couldn't avoid observing how Agnes skittered away, and kept to the other side of rooms, and clove to her mother and laughed provocatively from that shelter. Lawson had small, pale eyes that were exceedingly sad at times. Finally Martha took measures in his behalf.

Lawson had come to their rooms to announce that the boat would be ready next day, and to ask, " Where's the kid ? "

" Dressing. She'll be out in a minute."

" I thought she'd take more stock in the plant here," he said plaintively. " Kind of look around and be proud, seeing it'll be, in a way, hers."

" An engaged girl is apt to overlook mills."

" That bangle I gave her—you'd think it was all there was."

" It's the first trinket she's ever had."

" But there's more coming. How about the house we're going to have ? Guess I'm in love all right. I think about that house nights. Why don't she ? "

Martha evaded answering, but when Agnes came in, she had a proposal ready."

" You children are too restless for me," she said good-naturedly. " I wish to goodness you'd get out from under foot for a while. William, be a dear boy, and take Agnes for a walk around the plant."

Lawson entered the game with alacrity.

" Get your hat, kid," he said to Agnes.

Agnes looked at her mother. She hadn't been alone with Mr. Lawson since——

" You come too," she said abruptly.

" Didn't I say I wanted a little time to myself ? " Martha laughed. " Now—skip."

They didn't exactly skip. Mr. Lawson wasn't built for skipping. However, going alone with him wasn't bad at all. Not really bad. He walked beside her, even dropping behind sometimes when there was something he had to say to men in the mills. Mills were pretty much all alike, but Agnes pretended these were different.

" My ! " she exclaimed again and again. " I never heard so much noise."

" Too much noise, if you ask me," Lawson bellowed in her ear. " Let's find a quieter place—I say," he lifted his voice still higher, " let's find a quieter place."

Her legs began to wobble as they had done that last morning on the boat. But she went with him along a street out into a scarred country, and even into a dense second growth of maple and alder and hazel that tried to cover the ugliness of logged-off lands.

In the second growth, Agnes' legs which had wobbled before, stiffened and became stumping, unmanageable stilts. Mr. Lawson was ahead, holding up hazel twigs and maple runners. His arms were thrust forward and up, and his feet turned in as he walked, gripping the soil with their outer edges. Bowed a little, his legs looked sickeningly powerful and thick. His body bent at the waist.

She couldn't help looking at him, and at his strength. Even the brown clothes he wore, and the hard, round topped hat covering his head, were awful in strength. When his hands came down from twigs and runners, they swung pendulous, heavy, horrible on his wrists. He looked like——

Knowledge of what he looked like screamed suddenly and piercingly in Agnes. A thing had come to El Stancias once—a thing bent and powerful—confined in a cage. It had walked, half-bent behind its bars, with hands hanging.

He looked like the thing ! He looked like an ape !

He was an ape ! An ape that walked ahead of her, and held branches out of her way, and talked as he walked of a house with a bed-room. The stumping stilts that had

stiffened her legs fell, and her own maddened flesh and blood took flight.

With the rustle of woods about him, and plans for a bed-room in his ears, the man did not hear the splintering swiftness of escape behind him. He asked a question, and when she did not respond, he turned.

Rage clamped his jaws until the cigar he had been chewing came in two. He spit out the ragged residue left in his mouth.

Back in the mill he called a foreman. There are always details a foreman has not attended to. Taking the hide off the foreman relieved Mr. Lawson's feeling somewhat. How long was he going to stand nonsense from that girl? The old lady'd have to be talked to and the wedding hurried. The only way to take nonsense out of a kid was to get her where you wanted her.

Speed and terror of pursuit carried Agnes out of the woods towards her mother. She had to get to her mother, away from a whispering, tangled place where a thing walked with heavy hands and feet that turned inward to grip the ground.

Running crazily, blunderingly, her full lower lip swelling between her teeth, she came to the town at last and into the hotel and up the stairs.

" Back already? " Martha looked up as the door banged wide, and then was shut and locked. She had pulled a rocking-chair into the thin, clear sunshine of a window. Her books lay on the bureau, but she was reading a magazine.

Spent and breathless and shaking with horror, Agnes dropped to a chair inside the locked door, and tried to breathe. Senselessly her eyes focused on the magazine in her mother's lap and magnified it into a symbol. A symbol of what? She couldn't think. But the black books were laid away, and Mama sat with a red-covered magazine. It meant something. It meant that Mama was happy, not

struggling any more, happy in a room in a hotel. It meant that Mr. Lawson——

"Yes, I'm back," she said weakly. "I got—tired. I thought—you were all alone—and—and——"

"But I told you I wanted to be alone." Martha's chair swung, but she was alert. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Answer me, Agnes. Answer your mother. If you've quarrelled——"

Agnes tried to rise and failed.

"I said there was nothing the matter."

"Don't be impertinent." The rocking ceased. "Tell me. Have you quarrelled?"

"We couldn't. Mama—please—please—how could we quarrel when I ran away?"

"Ran away?" The chair tilted forward menacingly.

Faint and harassed as she was, Agnes writhed. Her wet hair clung to her brow. When she tried to push it back a lock came down and stuck across her eyes. She began to whine, softly and shudderingly, like a whipped child in a closet.

Martha had scant sympathy with hysterics in others.

"Why did you run away?" she demanded. "Don't you know you can't treat a man like William Lawson as you would a schoolboy? Why did you run? Answer me, I say."

"Please——" Inside Agnes' lower lip skin had been broken by her teeth. The taste of blood was under her tongue. "Please——"

"Why?"

"Mama—listen—please, Mama—listen. I had to run. He walked ahead, and his hands hung down and his feet turned in. He was strong—his legs were bowed and strong as he walked. He looked like an ape!"

Majesty rocked upon scythes as Martha swung forward in her chair.

"Ape!" she almost shrieked. "You called a man like William Lawson an ape?"

" I didn't call—I didn't say—I told you I ran—Oh, Mama—please ! "

" Please, please, please ! What have I ever heard out of you but please ? I'm tired——"

" But I have to. What can I do ? "

" What can you do ? What will you do ? you mean. All my life I've given myself without stint for you, hoping that through my sacrifice your life might be better than mine. I've sewed and cooked and scrubbed. I've planned for you and worked and thought for you. When William Lawson comes to fulfil my fondest dreams—you call him an ape ! "

" I didn't. Mama—I tell you I didn't call——"

" Ape ! A man like that—and you call him an ape ! "

Scythes swung as Martha collapsed. Her head went to the floor supported by the chair's inclined back. With a leap Agnes was in the bath-room. A tap whirled, and a glass rang against it.

The sound had an effect on Martha. It recalled a good blouse that had been spoiled. Pushing her feet out she thrust her strength against the chair. It came up, and she with it, swinging. Recovered balance jogged a fantastic thought into her head. Could it be Agnes didn't want to marry Mr. Lawson ?

" Agnes ! " she shrilled.

" Coming—the water runs warm—coming——"

" I'm better. Don't get the water. Come here."

Towel in hand, water spilling from a glass, Agnes slumped against the casing of the bath-room door. Her legs sagged and gave way. She had to hold the casing behind her to stand up. Sickness surged over her in waves and waves and waves.

" Come here," Martha said. " I want to ask you——"

" I—ca-can't——"

" Why not ? "

" I've—I've got to lie down. Le—let me lie down."

" Come here."

She came.

" Now then." The scythes poised on their arcs, and majesty sat still. " Do you, or don't you want to marry William ? It's got to be settled, once and for all."

" But if—if he should get mad and not take us back—on the boat——"

" That wouldn't matter. Your father can send money. Two hundred—maybe three—would pay hotel bills and railroad fares."

Three hundred dollars—the price of a book—from Papa.

" I want to marry him—that's settled." On the floor beside the poised scythes Agnes wiped back the lock of hair. Her hands were so wet it stayed. " If you won't let me get scared again——"

" I won't."

" Bu—but you've got to help. You said you'd promise not to let me ge-get scared. Promise again."

Martha began to cry, soundlessly, terribly. Tears fell and wet the crisp ruche of her collar. Agnes pushed up and got her arms inside the high arms of the chair.

" Don't ! Why should you cry ? Think—think—Papa'll be in his store when we get back. We'll be happy—you and Papa—and I. It isn't as though—I didn't want to—to get married. I'm too selfish to do—anything—anything I don't want——"

" If my baby's selfish, I've made her so," Martha sobbed. " I got to worrying—it seemed as though after all —maybe you'd liked the Michelson boy—even if he is the son of a renegade—and——"

Blood was on Agnes' tongue.

" Eddie—" she said in a far faint voice, straightening from her mother and letting her weight come to the kind, supporting floor. " Eddie—is as though—he had never been. You said that, didn't you ? He's as though—he never had been."

Martha stooped and got the child's hand against her mouth.

Agnes rose and went to the other room through the white cool bath. Eddie was with her, after long exile. His round, plain face moved as she lay on her bed and turned her eyes about the room.

" You're as though you'd never been," she said with only her lips. " As though you'd never been."

Removing traces of emotion at the wash-stand, Martha grew cheery.

" Don't worry about William," she said. " I'll talk to him."

" Don't say I thought—he looked like——"

" We don't hurt those we are fond of, even in jest. That little joke has gone far enough."

Agnes looked at Eddie in the cool sunlight. Was she hurting him? The news of her journey on the *Claribel* might have got to him. In El Stancias they said that letters went to Canada, and answers to old friends came back. Maybe even Papa wrote.

" Marriage," said Martha sagaciously from the bathroom, " is nothing to be frightened about. With some people it's one thing, and with others another. That's all there is to it."

" Don't ! " Agnes sat upright on her bed. " You promised you wouldn't let me get scared."

" Once," Martha wiped her hands thoughtfully, " you said you wanted to talk to your father——"

" Not now ! I'd rather die ! I'd die before I'd——"

Martha returned to her chair by the window to think of practical matters. There was purchasing and sewing ahead, and a house to be prepared for a wedding. Henry had likely raised all he could for the store on the Square. That left only Walter Morgan to fall back on. Walter liked Agnes and thought she looked like Lettie. He'd help his niece, who looked like Lettie, to start out well equipped for life.

" I was thinking," she called as she rocked in the sunlight, " that your Uncle Walter would want to lend what we need for clothes and such."

Agnes went to the dresser in the bedroom.

"Would Papa like that?" she asked slowly.

"We wouldn't bother him to ask." Martha rocked. "He has anxieties enough right now. We'll just arrange quietly with Walter."

"How—how much?" The girl's hair was so damp that every sweep of the comb pulled her head back until something inside flopped.

Martha went into brilliant mental arithmetic. No girl of hers was going to let a man think she came to him with nothing. There would be ribbon aisles, and flowers and music and a bridesmaid's dress for Stella. Henry mustn't give his daughter away in his own wedding clothes. He must have new ones. Martha herself would like a good piece of black lace over grey silk. The Daylight Store could order Agnes' dress from San Francisco, and a tailored suit to travel in. Totting up shoes, other dresses, stockings, petticoats, underwear, and household linen, Martha made an estimate.

"The least I figure is a thousand dollars," she said unperturbedly.

In the bedroom a comb hung poised as though frozen in air.

"Has—has Uncle Walter got—so much?" Agnes asked.

"Humph!" said Martha.

"But—could Papa ever pay?" Agnes came to the door.

"Good gracious child, you'll have money yourself!" Martha smiled as gloriously as the angel of a new annunciation." One thing you'll never have to contend with is a penurious man. Your money will be your own, and no questions asked. No woman who has any sense starts out accounting for every penny, and getting her husband into bad habits. You'll have more than you can use, and all you'll have to do is to send me something now and then out of what you don't need, to pay on account to your Uncle Walter."

Returning to the bureau Agnes took up her brush.

Long ago she had been dedicated to a hundred strokes a day. Aches in her head flopped and flopped as she brushed.

" You mean—we'd be silly to say anything to Papa or Mr. Lawson ? "

" There's certainly no need to advertise our poverty to William. As for your father, he never notices new things until bills come in. This time, thank goodness, there won't be any bills. It isn't as though there were anything dishonest about it. You'll have so much, neither you nor anybody else will notice what you send to pay off. When we get back to San Francisco, I'll go around and look at styles. From the way he talks it looks to me as though William might keep you busy at jewellery stores. He's like a youngster with a chance at a toy shop. Bless his heart. He'll start with one ring, and goodness knows where he'll go from there. We'll probably see some plays while we're in San Francisco, too. And the hotel is nice. I never get tired, just standing in a window of that hotel and looking down——"

Agnes brushed, and thought of a whole thousand dollars that she could give her mother, just out of what she couldn't use. The bracelet on her wrist dropped and swung. She liked the bracelet, but after this Mr. Lawson would probably give her rings. She spread one hand on the dresser and looked at it. She would have rings, and Mama would stand at a hotel window looking down, and Papa would prosper in a store on the Square.

From her place Martha observed the westering sun.

" William may be back," she said. " I'll go down and send for him to come to the lobby, and tell him you're sorry you were silly this afternoon. After that we'll all have dinner happily together. Don't worry. There's nothing to worry about. He's just a great, generous boy."

CHAPTER IX

The great, generous boy bumped down rather savagely from his rooms at Martha's summons. Taking the hide off the foreman had dulled some of the edge of his feelings, but they were still pretty ragged. Martha beckoned him into a corner of the lobby, and he sat down hard in a deep chair, tucking his chin into his collar sullenly.

" I've just given my bad little girl a scolding," she said blandly.

" What ails her ? " he growled.

" You don't know much about girls, do you, William ? "

" Plenty. Is she a fool, or am I ? "

" If ignorance is foolish, then I suppose she's the one. Sometimes I wish I'd been less careful raising her."

" Can't a girl be raised right, and still have sense ? "

" I'm afraid not, William. You want innocence, don't you ? "

" Sure."

" Then you'll have to pay the price of patience for it. Standing on the brink of marriage, girls think and wonder —and go into panics. It's the usual thing. It's because they know so little, and wonder so much."

Lawson considered what Martha had said. The kid had run from what she wondered—not from him. She didn't know beans—not beans. He'd have the teaching all to do himself—and that wasn't a bad idea either.

" I'll order dinner," he said. " You go up and tell her everything's fixed up."

At dinner Agnes was spiritless. Every now and then her eyes went to Lawson beseechingly. Without knowledge of her plight, Lawson reached a fairly opportune conclusion. If he wanted to save his own feelings, he'd better let her go her own way. He'd better plan his house and his bedroom in his thoughts and not aloud. That was what had scared her off. Well, he'd let her go her own way now.

Later on, when she had no way of her own to go, would be time enough for him.

Continuing expressible portions of his meditation, he spoke for a wedding soon after returning to El Stancias.

" You women-folk and your talk of clothes give me a pain," he said with elephantine gaiety. " Now look here—I got to run up to those woods for a couple of weeks, and when I come down there's a flyer to New York, and maybe London, to be made. Can't see any reason why the young lady shouldn't go along."

" Agnes' father must be consulted," Martha said complacently. " Remember we're giving Agnes up, and you'll have her for the rest of her life."

Lawson glanced at Agnes, and then down at his food. The colour in her cheeks was clear and red—like consumptives had. One of his books said a lot about consumptive women. It told how nature, packing all it could into the time left—— He guessed she wasn't consumptive. He hoped not. But that last night on the boat she'd surely been up to something for a while.

Funny he wasn't sore about the punishment he'd taken for that night and for the talk of a house when they were walking through the woods. The blamed kid was so young. There was something kind of stately and lonely about being as young as she was, that got at you. The sooner she got over being young, the better for all concerned.

" Barnet'll understand a man can't be kept hanging around for ever," he said.

He suggested no more walks through the mills before the *Claribel* sailed next day. On the boat he let Agnes arrange how they should sit and walk, and when they should talk.

By dint of such policy Agnes suffered no repetition of the crisis in the woods. When they tramped the deck she was nervously abreast of him, or ahead. She even managed time to herself.

Every so often Lawson carried misgivings to Martha. The kid acted like he was poison. Martha presented Agnes'

ignorance as an excuse and said that, given time, she would settle down.

Lawson knew that she would settle down in time. You bet your life she'd settle down. And get back that lost ginger beside. He was particularly keen on her getting back lost ginger.

In San Francisco he had a pretty tough tussle holding ardour in check. It seemed such a waste not to take advantage of what the town and the Palace were manifestly built for.

The old Palace Hotel, erected in a fabulous era before earthquake and fire tamed the lusty, gusty, lovely Golden Gate city to mediocrity, was all things to all men. It played up to those who took their sunlight straight, and afforded retreats for such as elected filagreed hanging lamps, incense, and swirled Bagdad curtains to aid in the ways of men with maids.

Built when all out-doors belonged to everybody, its central court opened to the sky and was commodious enough to receive four-horse coaches when they came trumpeting back from plunging gallops out to seal-rocks and glassed-in baths.

Tier upon tier, opening to the court, and supported by semi-Oriental, semi-Hamburg edging cloisters, were chambers, each with double glass doors which, whether open or closed, revealed intimate shadowings of life as lived in inns.

Back from light and dancing dust in the court, dining-rooms, magnificent in gold-leaf and marble-ised paint, were curtained from street gapers by three-ply hangings of damask and silk and lace. More secluded even than dining-rooms were cosy corners—those cushioned, strangling retreats devised by hard-put Victorians to meet certain unmentioned requirements of the human soul.

Lawson appropriated the Palace when he was there. He showed it off as though he owned it. There was no food, native or foreign, that he couldn't command from

the kitchens. Waiters kow-towed and knew what he meant. When he drove into the court he raised the supreme dust of all time. In the parlours he was at home. Cosy corners were to him his own peculiar nests of love.

Into these nests he couldn't resist bringing Agnes. And from them Agnes again and again made escape through a subterfuge of sneezing at the dust. Sweet, sticky coffee, served in brass bowls by Lascar stewards who had left their ships in the harbour, were powerless to hold her. Even Lawson's whispered promise to teach her to be naughty and smoke cigarettes was only a temporary detainer. She envied the strange pale women from far parts of the world who trailed silken draperies into the darkened recesses for the purpose of inhaling scented fumes, and wished she could be like them. But nevertheless she fled the smothering cubby-holes like so many infection spots.

On the day of arrival, Lawson had launched the dazzling enterprise of getting a ring.

" Two big places we could go," he said. " But I like the Diamond Palace best. More stones out and around in show-cases, and they cost just as much as they do at Shreves'."

Loose in the Diamond Palace he found it impossible to hold himself down to one jewel. Agnes emerged wearing a ring so heavy that the setting pulled around into the palm of her hand. Over her white shirt-waist dipped a chain of gold and diamonds that was anchored to her belt with a watch incrusted in star-fish pattern on both sides. A pair of spikes eight inches in length and studded at the ends like war-clubs, held her hat to her hair. The collar cinching her throat was secured at the back with glittering spiders that snagged the tendrils of her hair. Even her extremities were overlaid with splendour. Lawson had sent out for some low, Puritan shoes, and had their tongues adorned with blazing buckles.

" Why not carry some of them in boxes—or have them sent? " Agnes proposed timidly, regarding herself in a

mirror of the private showroom, into and out of which Lawson had darted for what seemed to her as long as a week.

" When you have 'em, you wear 'em," Lawson philosophised. " You've never been dressed up before. When you get used to it, you wouldn't be any other way."

Martha swallowed hard when she saw her daughter. Then she mastered herself and beamed on Lawson.

" What a boy you are, William. What a great, bounding boy. I think I won't go down to dinner, if you don't mind. Just a snack here on the balcony. You'd like to show her off, in her pretty things, alone, wouldn't you ? "

Lawson allowed that he would.

Martha had intended to employ her solitude in composing orations for Walter Morgan when she went to him in his office. But troubled recollections got in her way. Walter had been none too genial on a notable occasion. He might not perceive his duty to his niece when it was first presented to him. So she gave up the orations for the time being, and watched the lights and the crowds in the court below.

It was their third and last day in San Francisco when, dressing carefully, she left Agnes napping in their rooms, and set out upon her errand.

She was not without apprehensions. The elevator in Walter's building was a creeping, raucous utility that somehow added to her uneasiness. Nothing but the necessity confronting her prevented flight at its first stop. But the necessity was very much there. Leaving the elevator at the fifth floor, she saw her brother-in-law's shadow outlined against a light behind his ground-glass door. With a hand on the knob, she took her courage in her teeth and went in.

Walter blinked, stared, and rose. When Martha took a chair, he sat in his own again.

" I didn't know you were in town," he said. " Does Lettie ? "

" I couldn't let you know. We've just got in." Martha

was frightened, but lied very sweetly. "We're guests, Agnes and I, and guests you know have to accommodate their time to their host."

"Oh—so you're visiting." He was relieved, but wary. "How long you think of staying?"

"We're only here until to-morrow."

"Oh."

Martha was aroused. If Walter thought she was just a poor relation back to ask poor relation favours again, the sooner he was enlightened to her new estate the better.

"We've planned to go then," she said. "But it's not difficult to alter schedules for a private car."

"Private car! Phew!" Walter's look inquired into her sanity. "What's up? Old Hank re-located the mother lode?"

"It's not Henry's private car." She conveyed that it might be Henry's, but wasn't. "We're with Mr. William Lawson."

"Oh." A pause. "Saw by the paper he had a crowd at the Palace. That's you, I suppose."

"Agnes too."

"Yes—Agnes."

Martha essayed sprightliness intermingled with resignation.

"Agnes is a very happy child," she said. "She is engaged to William."

Morgan's jaw jutted out.

"You're not serious," he said.

"I am serious. It's very sad, and very beautiful."

Walter got up. There was nothing to do when he was up, so he sat down again.

"If Agnes thinks it's beautiful," he said, "she's different from what I thought she was."

"I can't know, of course, what you thought of Agnes."

"I thought she was a darned decent infant. That's what I thought. If she is, she's no business hooking up with Lawson. He's a—a bad egg."

" Walter, you never were careful with your language. It breaks out——"

" It's sure about to break out now. Martha, you can't know much about Lawson or you wouldn't——"

" I've found it best always to judge righteous judgment. There is probably a great deal said about William, but I don't care to hear it, knowing that his prominence subjects him to envious attacks."

" What are you here for, Martha ? If you'd come to ask my advice, you'd listen to me. I can see you're not going to do that."

Trepidation returned. Defending herself or William or Agnes, Martha was an army with banners. Asking for money, she shrank. Walter saw her hesitation and essayed a guess.

" What is it you want ? " he asked. " Money ? "

" Yes." By not having to say the word herself, she recovered self-assertion. " I want a loan from you. You will of course receive the customary rate of interest." She mentioned interest because it put Walter where he belonged, among usurers.

" Will I ? " Walter refused to be insulted. " Who'll pay it ? Old Hank ? "

" You'll get it, so it makes no difference where it comes from."

" You bet your sweet life it does. I'm not going to squeeze blood out of Hank Barnet."

" It won't come from Henry."

" Oho ! So you're borrowing already on your kid's prospects. She's to be sacrificed first—and then pay for the privilege."

" Try not to make a simple transaction difficult by using disagreeable words." The army with banners came into full action. " All I want is a thousand dollars."

" Does it cost a thousand dollars to lead a heifer to the altar ? "

" Please, Walter—be careful of words."

" What's the matter with heifer? Martha—for Lord's sake—are you just plain criminal, or out and out damn fool? Don't you know Bill Lawson's record? I thought I told you once about the dago girl——"

" You did. When you were questioned, you admitted it was baseless slander. I choose not to recall slander against a boy who has proven himself all and more than I had ever hoped for in a son-in-law."

" Hank——? "

" Even my husband has not recalled your libellous conversation that evening you were in El Stancias. Walter, I didn't come here to quarrel. But I must tell you that I feel towards William as I would towards my own son. And the fact of my feeling is sufficient evidence for me."

" Sure it is. Same old Martha. See what you want, and then order God and His angels to fall in line and get it for you. If you want to see Bill Lawson as a gingerbread saint with frosting for his nose, nothing in this world or the next is going to tell you he's flavoured with cyanide. It's his money that has done it. You think it's observation, but it's money. Money's all the passion you've got, Martha. It'll buy imitations of all the others in you, but it's the one and only. Look at Hank. You think you're all-fired holy with Hank. But if he ever gets a wad again you'll haul the old double-bed out of storage and buy peek-a-boo nighties."

" I said I didn't come here to quarrel."

" Well, I'm here, and I'm going to quarrel. And just to start the fracas, I'll say first off that your proposition is turned down. I'm not going to have spots on my conscience that won't come off."

" Do you mean you won't lend me what I need? "

" I won't."

The ultimatum sank and plumbed the depths of Martha's realisation. Then like a diver signalling, it sent up messages that all was well. Walter had refused her request, and by so doing had spared her from the blot of being under obligations to him. She could wash her hands, now and

for ever, of Walter Morgan, and seek what she required from less polluted sources. Andromache before the slayer of Hector was not more royal than Martha as she rose.

" Good-bye," she said.

" Look here, Mart ! " Walter lunged up. " Go out and talk to Let. You think I go into dirt for dirt's sake, but you don't think that of Let. Listen to what she says of this Lawson leper."

" You carry your unclean scandals home to your wife, then ? " She regarded him with dispassionate eyes.

" You bet your life I do. I carry everything I've got to Let. What I want is that you should go to her and ask if she thinks it's better you should marry Agnes to Bill Lawson, or take her off some place and shoot her quietly while she's still sweet and clean."

Martha's answer was an opening and closing of the door, and an equable, rapt progress to the elevator and out of the building. The only impressions she carried from the offices were that she would get money elsewhere, and that Walter had tried to besmirch a dear boy because he was jealous of the boy's place in the world.

When she was gone Morgan hung over his desk watching the veins swell on the backs of his hands. Going to the cumbersome brown wooden telephone box screwed on the wall, he rang twice for central and gave his home number.

" Say Let, your precious sister has been in——"

" Oh, Walter ! "

" Hold your horses, she's not coming to us. There are bigger fish afloat. Agnes is along, and the two of them are at the Palace with Lawson. Yep—Bill Lawson. She's jiggered it around for Agnes to marry him."

" Walt—you've been drinking."

" That's an idea. Maybe if I get drunk I can forget it. But what I want is for you to tuck up your bonnet strings and run down to see her. I tried to talk, but she headed in and sank me. You go tell her what she's up to."

" Tell Martha ? "

" Yes."

" Martha, Walter ? Don't you know Martha yet ? "

" We've got to do something."

" We've got to mind our own business."

" If an eighteen-year-old girl isn't our business——"

" Not with Martha running her, she isn't."

" Let, if you won't go to the Palace, I'll hop on the next train and see Hank."

" I forbid that."

" What the hell ? "

" Exactly. What the hell ? Do you want Martha to stage something big—an elopement, for all we know ? If she's come to the point of letting Agnes marry at all, she's also come to the point of knowing it's right ; and she'll see it through over our dead bodies."

" But Hank ? "

" If you mix Henry in this, she'll set Agnes against him. And the time is coming when Agnes will need her father."

Walter stood for a long moment at the brown box before he spoke again.

" What was the name of the dago girl ? You know—the wop from the asparagus boat. She's still around, isn't she ? "

" I've forgotten her name. And she's none of our business, too."

" I'd know it if I saw it—the name. Maybe she'll take a hand when the news comes out in the papers. It'll do that pretty soon, I should think, considering Martha."

" And Lawson. He spreads around."

" Yes."

" Well, anyway, I'll be damned if I lend Mart the money she wants to buy scenery for her show."

" I'll be damned if you do, too," said Lettie.

CHAPTER X

The first thing William Lawson did when he got to El Stancias was to greet Henry Barnet at the station and make an appointment to see him at his new store.

Henry agreed, somewhat questioningly.

"No need for you to come home with us, William," Martha arranged. "Nor you either, Henry. We can talk in the hack, and drop you at the Square."

"How about a half-hour from now?" Lawson asked Barnet.

Henry nodded, still with that questioning manner, and put his family into the hack he had brought.

"What's it all about?" He looked at the gewgaws adorning Agnes.

"William and Agnes," Martha said. "William and our little girl——"

"I suppose it had to come, sometime." Henry sank into his corner. "Don't mind me; I'll perk up after a while."

In a half-hour Lawson appeared in the store and gave a fairly plausible exhibition of a meek young man asking for a girl in marriage. Henry could still only nod. But when it came to mention of a hurried wedding, he developed symptoms of a mulish streak.

"I must talk to my wife," he said, "and to Agnes. When you come right down to it, Agnes is the one to be asked."

Lawson admitted that, reluctantly, and apparently changed the subject.

"If my mind stays made up," he said, "I'll start putting up buildings for headquarters in a month or so. Going to the mountains to-morrow and cruise around for a couple of weeks, making measurements and calculations. It looks to me, now, as though if I took those tracts, logging would go on for a good many years. You won't need any more than you've got, by the time it plays out. Nor anybody else in this town."

"I guess you're right," Henry conceded. "I guess you're right. Fine thing for this part of the country."

"It isn't by a long shot the only timber I could get in the state. Plenty of timber, one place and another. But I've kind of taken a notion to this district. Still—it's only a notion."

"We'd be sorry to lose you, Lawson," Henry returned. "But we can't force you to take what you don't want."

Lawson laughed queerly and went away.

At home, Henry's mulish symptoms increased.

"I haven't said 'Yes' yet," he told Martha, "What I propose to find out is, has Agnes any affection for him?"

Out of deference to Martha he used the word affection. Anyway, the other was hard to say.

Martha assured him that of course Agnes had affection for William. It was beautiful to see the boy's devotion.

"I don't like all that stuff she's wearing," Henry countered. "It looks flashy."

"A woman ought to have jewels. After the novelty wears off, she'll learn when to put them on and when to leave them off."

"Have you talked to her? Agnes?"

"Agnes and I have always shared each other's confidences."

"What I'm trying to get at is—there are things about getting married that a girl ought to know before she goes into it."

Martha thought that if Henry were only more spiritually advanced, she could make him understand. She could tell him, not only that William was superior to other men but that even if there were faint tinctures of the carnality common to his sex about him, Agnes need not be really touched. The parable of Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego, unscorched in the fiery furnace, would be useful, if only Henry's ears were refined to the meanings of parables. As Henry's ears were not refined, she was forced to employ arguments he could grasp.

" I should think you'd be ashamed," she said. " Your own child——"

" We've got to think of that side," Henry broke in truculently. " Agnes has been raised not to ask why seeds sprout nor to mention calves until they're running around in the pen. She's been raised too darned nice, if you ask me."

" Raising Agnes has been my job. If you'll look back over the years you'll see why it has been. I've had the worry and the work——"

" Let's not go into that now. I'm asking you, have you talked facts to Agnes ? "

" Do you trust me with my child, or don't you ? Have I always been a good mother, or haven't I ? "

" What I want to get at is——"

" Henry Barnet, it would be as wrong to shock Agnes with unnecessary details as it would be to fling them at those birds in the tree outside."

" Those birds have all the details."

" A young girl's dreams——"

" She can't get along on dreams. There are words that have to be used, sometimes, whether they shock or not. If you haven't used them, I will."

Martha held a trump which she needn't play. Agnes would play it for her. Hadn't Agnes said she wouldn't talk to her father ?

" Go ahead," she said. " Say what you please—if you can."

He tried. There was neither the right time nor the right setting. Nevertheless when Martha remained in her room next morning he barged ahead—and brought disaster down. Agnes came to the kitchen for breakfast, and stirring the coffee, Henry cleared his throat and spoke through the smoke of a matutinal griddle.

" Now this—about getting married," he said with considerable difficulty. " If you've made up your mind——"

Agnes rattled the cups she was setting out.

" I'll get syrup for the cakes," she said, and took to the pantry.

Henry's nerve weakened.

" I got the syrup," he said, as, coffee-pot in hand, he followed her. Agnes was searching shelves insanely, shifting spice cans, moving baking-powder tins in which sage and thyme were kept.

" I'm your father," he said gently. " I can talk to you, because you're mine. Now what I'm trying to get at is—when a girl thinks of marrying she ought to know——"

" Stop ! " Back to the shelves, Agnes confronted him. " Stop, I say ! I won't let you or anybody else——"

" But I'm your father." He put the coffee-pot on the floor and reached for her. She flattened tighter to the shelves.

" Go away ! " She struck down his threatened embrace. " Do you hear ? Go away. Eat your breakfast and go ! "

He retreated to breakfast. Pancakes were grating chaff in his throat. She was crying in the pantry. He could hear sobs like short, sharp stabs. His purpose died in anguish.

" Come, daughter." He pushed back the saccharine mess before him. " I'll promise anything."

There was no answer but stabbing sobs.

" Daughter—your old father's a bungler. He ought to be lynched. If there's anything he can do to make up, tell him, and he'll do it. Only come out and eat your breakfast."

" I'll never come out. I'll stay until you're gone. I'll stay if it's the rest of my life."

He pushed back his chair.

" I'm gone," he said from the dining-room. " Come out and eat."

Waiting until the front door closed, she came. Tremors shaking her were more than fright. She hated her father—hated him. She wanted to go to her mother and cry out against her father—but she couldn't. Never in all her life could she tell even her mother why and how she hated her father, because she didn't know.

Fearful lest reverberations of the kitchen tragedy would

require explanation, Agnes went to the hall and listened upstairs. Her mother hadn't heard. There was no sound. Martha slept. Agnes hated her father—hated him.

Down the street the postman whistled. Agnes went to the porch to cleanse herself with morning air. Her knees knocked. She hadn't known there could be such hate as she had for her father.

"One for you." The postman gave two letters. "One for the Missus. Glad to see you back."

Hating her father Agnes stared at an envelope, and saw a Canadian stamp over an address written with hunched R's and round staring vowels.

The glaze over her eyes dissolved. Dropping the other envelope on the stairs she ran to her room. Her room wasn't safe. The lock was broken, and the partition between it and Martha's was thin. Tearing an envelope might awaken a sleeper.

Shoving the letter into her shirt-waist, she tried to think. The whole house pounded with her heart. Only the bathroom door locked.

Reaching the bathroom she turned the key cautiously and tore the envelope, half inch by half inch.

> "AGNES," Eddie began. "I've heard, and you can't do it. You can't because you love me and I love you. You've got to wait for me. When the seven years are up that outlaw the charge, we'll be back, all of us. But if I don't hear inside of a month that you're waiting for me, I'll come by myself and stop what you're doing. I can do it because of Doyle's lot. You proved there that you loved me.
>
> "Yours for ever,
>
> "E. MICHELSON."

The knob of the bathroom door turned.

"Are you in there, Agnes?" Martha called.

The girl's "Yes," was barely audible. What could she do? Letters rattled in shirt-waist fronts.

"Did the postman leave anything?"

"Where is it?" Agnes looked distractedly around. "I must have dropped——"

Agnes couldn't tell whether Martha descended the stairs or went to her room. She had to read what Eddie said again—but she didn't dare. What had the letter said? All she could recall were hunched R's and round O's. If she went to see Stella, or devised an errand, a place might be found where she could read. But to pass in review before Martha with a bulging, crackling shirt-waist front would be like being taken with a dripping knife or smoking revolver. It would be to be caught in crime. There only remained to hide the letter—hide it—treasure it—for another time.

The turn to her room was short, but Agnes traversed perilous miles—and found no security at the end.

The space behind the picture over the bed, corners of bureau drawers, between springs and mattress—each place she tried moved forward and advertised its purpose. She put the letter in the shoe-box in her closet, and it too leaped into prominence.

Back of the box a skirt-board had warped from the wall. The comb from the bureau made a flat blade to drive the letter into the crack. She poked and poked.

"What are you doing, child?" Her mother spoke outside the closet.

"Looking for a shoe." Concealing the comb, she dragged out a slipper. Martha regarded the single item of footgear.

"Go get my letter," she ordered.

The letter in the crack cried out its danger as she went.

"Whatever ails you?" Martha questioned as she hurried back. "You're red as a beet."

"Because—I ran—upstairs." Agnes stood at the mirror, back turned.

Martha watched the face in the glass.

"If I'm to get to work," she said, "I'll need thread. Put on your hat and run down for six spools of white,

number eighty, and three of black silk, letter A. Move, dear. What ails you ? "

Agnes moved. From her own window Martha studied the slim, headlong figure running down the street. Henry had probably tried his experiment in paternal solicitude. But even the worst failure of which Henry was capable hardly explained that driven rush down the street.

Opening her own letter inattentively she saw Walter's scrawl covering a long sheet.

> " The Italian girl's name was Franconi," it said. " I've just remembered. Lawson ditched her, but you can get her father's address through the Stockton post office. He'll give you full particulars what kind of a bird Lawson is, and maybe even a list of those that have followed his kid."

The communication was undisguised, but being unsigned made it anonymous, and Martha knew that anonymous letters were to be cast away, unheeded.

Indicating her scorn for scurrilous and anonymous attempts at defamation of character, she took the letter to the kitchen and burned it. And there, drinking her morning coffee, she found the explanation of Agnes' conduct. Nothing was too barbarous for Walter Morgan. He had sent a duplicate of his letter to the child.

Inflamed at the thought of Agnes assailed in her happiness by underhanded attacks upon the man she was to marry, Martha set out upon a search of Agnes' room.

With characteristic thoroughness she went through bureau drawers, lifted the mattress, turned the picture on the wall, and pulling out the shoe-box explored toes of shoes and slippers. The crack behind the box caught her eye, and using a button-hook as a grappling iron she fished up a crushed envelope. Pushing the box into place, she sought the light.

After Walter's, Eddie's letter was, at first, a mere impertinence. Then the threat incorporated in it, and

reference to a proof of love, struck at her fears and congealed her blood.

Doyle's lot! Doyle's lot, still unreduced to the status of something that had never been! And now Eddie, the son of a fugitive from justice, was coming to flourish those old hours in Doyle's lot over the head of a helpless child and ruin her life.

Resolute at once, Martha set herself to outwit the enemy. Calculating swiftly, she knew by the post-mark on the envelope that news, at its swiftest, could not reach the eastern and northern province within a week. Another week would be consumed by a traveller journeying to California. Agnes hadn't money to telegraph. Why—a powerful and healing thought came to Martha—Agnes couldn't even write. Not at once. Her watchful mother had given her no time to copy the address, and now the letter would be destroyed. If Agnes went hunting through El Stancias for friends who still wrote to the Michelsons, it would take days for her to find them and persuade them to divulge what they knew. Neither would announcements of an approaching wedding reach Canada at once from other sources. The proclivity of old-timers to delay would attend to that.

Figuring rapidly and accurately, Martha decided that William must be humoured in his whim for a wedding as soon as he returned from the mountains. Agnes was protected not only by a watchful mother, but one who could get a trousseau ready in record time.

Married, the beset and endangered girl would be invulnerable. Cowards roared only against the poor and helpless. They slunk away from the fortifications of wealth and position. Let Eddie Michelson come in his threatened month and find Agnes married and gone, and return, harmless, to his shameful obscurity.

Rendered benign by the part of vigilant guardian she was to play, Martha quenched a desire to have it out with Agnes about the letter. The episode was closed, the letter destroyed. Let Agnes think it had slipped down and been

lost between floors. Though the demonstration of annihilation had not been complete before, now it was fulfilled. Eddie Michelson was as though he had never been.

Traces of humour recalled to Martha that she had sent for thread, and approved sardonically. She had need of thread. It would require work and money to prepare a trousseau in two weeks. She faced the need of immediate money.

Because the click of the sewing machine was a familiar accompaniment of thought, she sewed. When people needed money urgently, what did they do? The answer was that they went to banks and got it.

The treadle of the machine hung at half stitch while Martha Barnet considered banks.

CHAPTER XI

Too spent to run home as she had run down town, Agnes sank on a bench in the Square. The packet of spools in her lap jogged up and down with the jogging of her knees. Even when she sat down her knees jogged.

It was imperative to get home, read Eddie's letter and hide it again in a better place, but she was afraid. If she could only remember what he had said there would be comfort in that. Closing her eyes to get a picture of the letter, she saw only hunched R's and round, staring O's.

Need to read the letter buoyed her up and started her home. Half-way there the certainty that her mother had found the damning document smote her, and detouring to the little store vacated so recently by her father, she sat on an empty box thrown in the doorway, and wondered what she should do. There was nothing to do, and she went on again.

Arrived at home she knew immediately and with a swelling of gratitude, that no find had been made. The sewing machine hummed. When Agnes went up with the thread her mother looked thoughtful, and that was all. But she gave Agnes no chance at the crack behind the box.

The whole day long she kept her busy, running here and there, doing this and that.

Mr. Lawson drove up in the rig he had rented from the Livery and Feed. Agnes indicated her unwillingness to see him in the kitchen apron she was wearing, and her mother agreed that she might stay out of sight. Lawson was affronted and told Mrs. Barnet that he and Emmons of the First National had business to occupy them all evening, and Agnes needn't expect him until next morning before he left for the hills.

Dinner was more than usually silent that night. Henry went to bed directly his chores were done, looking bent and pitiful as he climbed the stairs. If Agnes hadn't hated him so, she would have followed him to the next floor and spoken his name or touched him in evidence of forgiveness for the morning. But she did hate him.

It was ten o'clock at night before Martha dismissed her daughter and went to bed. In her room, Agnes alternately listened, and moved towards the closet. Then when she reached it she didn't dare move the box. Her mother would hear. She went to bed.

The Court House clock banged out eleven, and then twelve. When it announced the quarter hour after twelve, Agnes rose, felt through the darkness, and armed with a button-hook groped to the closet and moved the box an inch, two inches, three.

The button-hook brought up nothing at all. Sitting back on the closet floor Agnes faced the calamity of the ineffectual button-hook. Eddie's letter assumed the wispiness of a dream. Perhaps it had never come at all. Or if it had come, it had been swallowed in oblivion. The crack was deep, and the letter swallowed. She returned to bed.

Martha was up and about early next morning.

" I've errands," she said archly as soon as Henry was gone. " You look a little peaked. Maybe I'd better drop around to William's car alone and say good-bye to him before he goes."

" Oh—please ! " Agnes executed the first spontaneous movement of twenty-four hours. " Please do. You're so good, Mama. And I don't feel very good——"

Martha kissed the waxen face.

" Don't wait lunch too long. I may be late getting home."

It was just before noon, at the lazy hour when there were no customers, that Martha entered Henry's new store.

" I've been talking to William," she said rather wistfully. " And Henry—I think we've got to give in to him. He does so want to be married when he comes from the mountains—and take Agnes east with him—maybe even to London."

" But two weeks ! " Henry leaned on a counter. " My Lord ! "

" Well—I talked and talked. But it's hard to deny a boy like William."

" It's out of all reason ! " Henry launched the only bolt he had, and then subsided to niggling tactics. " There must be a lot to do before a girl gets married. I should think it would take time."

" I'm used to work." Martha looked transfigured.

" But money—if I had a few months—but I've borrowed up to the hilt to move here——"

" I supposed you had." Martha was all compliance. " And so I've seen a way to manage——"

Edging her way to equivocation, she felt rather bitterly the need of resorting to lies, but justified herself by remembering that a mother fighting for her child is a tigress defending her young. Henry and everybody else must be kept quiet, and speed must be made.

Henry had a moment of intuition, and flung out a second defiance.

" You didn't borrow from Walt while you were south, did you ? " he asked truculently. " I won't be beholden to Walt for——"

" Nor I," Martha assured him instantly. " But Lettie is my own sister——"

" I don't like it even from Lettie."

" Lettie owes me considerable, Henry, if you figure the years I took care of her—sewing and saving——"

" If you figure like that on Lettie, what you going to figure with Agnes, I want to know ? "

" Henry—I've had to do what I could. If you could have provided for Agnes——"

He cowed before the old indictment. A straggler came in for some sand-paper, and Martha went out.

Her plans were in order. If Henry had showed any inclination to shoulder his own load, she would have been willing for him to do so. But he'd warded off mention of obligations by saying he had already borrowed to the hilt. If he knew of his daughter's danger from Eddie Michelson, he ought to approve the measures she was about to take. However, he mustn't know of that. Along with other shortcomings, Henry's morals were dubious. He might insist on Eddie's coming—he might even marry his child off to the inheritor of Michelson crime. Martha had to go alone—as she had always done.

Intent upon the lone hand she played, she did not repair to the First National and Will Emmons. Instead she sought out the Cattleman's State, a secondary institution that would undoubtedly leap at even remote connections with William Lawson.

Mr. Thornquist, the cashier, invited her into an enclosure separated from other departments of the institution by iron palings.

Martha explained that she needed money and wanted to borrow on her personal note, with no endorsers.

Mr. Thornquist waved business aside temporarily.

" I don't know whether I should or not, Mrs. Barnet," he said affably, " but I'd like to offer congratulations. Everybody's saying your daughter, who by the way is one of the most charming of young women, and Mr. William Lawson——"

" They are to be married," Martha interposed.

" Well—now ! " Mr. Thornquist grasped Martha's hand. " May I ask when ? "

" I am ordering invitations to-day," Martha said, and sighed. " The wedding will be in two weeks."

" So it's as soon as that ! " Mr. Thornquist beamed.

" Mr. Lawson finds that his business arrangements——"

" Lawson is a fine fellow," Thornquist expanded. " To be a bit sordid, I don't mind telling you, Mrs. Barnet, that his marrying a local girl means a lot to this town. A man won't go back on a place where he's found a girl like your daughter. I, for one, feel that the city owes the young couple something handsome, and that a set of silver, engraved with their twined initials and those of El Stancias wouldn't be out of the way."

" You're very kind. Now as to this other matter. I would give my personal note for a thousand dollars——"

Again Mr. Thornquist flourished monetary details aside with a gesture.

" So little Agnes Barnet is going to be Mrs. William Lawson in two weeks," he mused. " By the way, Mrs. Barnet, tell your husband if there's anything the Cattleman's can do for him, starting up new and all as he is, to call in. One of our solid, substantial citizens, Henry Barnet is."

" Will it take long to get the money ? " Martha enquired. " Two weeks is all too short a time to make ready for a wedding."

" Collins ! " Thornquist halted a passing employee. " Fill out a note form for a thousand dollars for Mrs. Henry——"

" Martha Barnet," he was corrected.

" Mrs. Martha Barnet. Is that all you want ? " he inquired solicitously. " A thousand's not much."

" A thousand is sufficient," Martha said modestly.

" For thirty days ? " he deferred to her. " That's the usual time."

Martha nodded. Thirty days, a whole month, was

adequate, considering the emergency. And in thirty days the face of the world would have changed.

Thornquist directed Collins.

"While we're waiting," he rose and bowed to Martha, "if you'll be so kind, we'll step around to the teller and arrange a chequeing account. You'll want the money on deposit, I presume. We have some pretty cheque-books, especially for ladies. Now that we have your business, as well as that of some other ladies, we'll probably open a special window. We don't like to see our customers of the fair sex standing in line with cowpunchers and lumberjacks. We western men hold women pretty high——"

Martha made her signature at the teller's window. Mr. Thornquist blotted it obsequiously. She signed the note, exchanged it for a pass-book and one of the very pretty cheque-books, and succeeded in getting away by dint of friendly adieus. She was both flattered and rendered alert by the attentions she had received. She wondered if a woman's own account in a bank was her own affair. Surely Mr. Thornquist would not speak to Henry about the note.

Outside the bank, she felt somewhat abused about the note. She had been rushed into accepting only thirty days. That thirty days savoured of sharp practice on Mr. Thornquist's part. When one had business to transact, they should really go to the First National. It was Henry's fault that she had been driven to the Cattleman's State. Henry had alarmed her by his talk of already having borrowed to the hilt.

Depressed by a lowering realisation of only thirty days between her and the maturing of her debt, Martha felt the need of stimulating activity. Agnes would have to eat her lunch alone, or wait. Acute to her own necessities, she went first of all to the stationer's, ordered invitations in a neat, clear script, accepted the felicitations of the proprietor of the shop, and got his promise that all other work should be put aside, and her commission attended to at once.

The date she gave the engraver had an invigorating

effect. There were sixteen days between that and the one Mr. Collins had written in a sweeping hand on the form he made out. In sixteen days after her wedding, Agnes would never miss a thousand dollars sent to her mother.

She was so restored by the date on the invitations that she felt the need of no further shopping, and returned home.

The only reaction Agnes experienced from her mother's announcement that William would wait no longer than two weeks, was to remember, almost in its entirety, the message in Eddie's letter. As though she had at last snagged it up from the crack where it was lost she saw the paper and every desperate boy word that had been written. Eddie had given her a month. But in two weeks she would be married. Eddie could not get to El Stancias—he could not even hear what was going forward in two weeks.

Numb relief followed her first wild thoughts of Eddie. The inevitable was inevitable. She would be married when Eddie came, no matter how soon that might be. It was written that she should be married when Eddie came. His letter to her was voided by powers greater than him or herself, and all that was left was to ride smoothly and swiftly, down and down on a great slide of events.

Receiving adumbrations of the girl's thought Martha provided diverting interests. Together they bought dresses and hats and cloaks. They were dressed for shopping as soon as Henry left the house mornings. Delivery men came in processions. Martha's aversion to the flesh was forgotten. She plunged openly into departments where ready-made white garments were displayed. Embroidered, stringed, ruffled and buttoned unmentionables in brazen multiplicity were bought and laid between sachets at the bottom of a newly acquired trunk.

But Martha's valour was largely on the surface. Planning and buying and packing, she heard the whistle of every train that might by some malevolent twist of fate bring Eddie Michelson. Nor was Agnes, losing the bleakness with which she had received announcement of her wedding day,

the least of her mother's anxieties. She laughed and purchased things, but hectically, madly, like a demented little dancer toeing it over a touched-off mine. She laughed at the wrong things, and the wrong things came up constantly to be laughed at. Martha was profoundly thankful that William was away during this depressing period. No telling what might happen if he were there. Martha's mind refused to encompass what might happen. She prayed devoutly for a change of mood in Agnes, so that the disturbing business of a thirty-day note at the bank might be decently discussed between them.

Distraught, she sought recourse in intensified sewing.

" I'm going to make your best set myself," she said one day as she unwrapped a package. " We've got to buy so much, but I want your best set to be made by me."

When tears sprang to her eyes, Agnes swooped and kissed them away. Taking up the lace for the best set she held it before her like a veil. She fingered the nainsook to which it was to be applied, and laughed because it was as sheer as gauze.

Spinning in her whirlpool, she wondered where all the money had come from. Uncle Walter must have loaned a lot. Her father hadn't noticed what was being spent, but that was because men were blind. Almost from infancy she had known that men saw nothing if strings and paper were cleared away before they came home.

Sitting down with the gauzy nainsook in her hands, she thought of her father. She still hated him, but for all that she was glad, for his sake, of the new peace in the house. Weird and lurid—yet there was peace.

Stitching, whipping, hemming, inserting, as days went by, Martha dwelt alternately upon perils embodied in Eddie, and the shortening inadequacy of thirty days. Agnes ought to be talked to—but how to do it ? She acted like a crazy girl. She might do any disastrous thing in her present mood. She ought to be told that she had a duty to perform in sixteen days after she was married. A clever

bride could work wonders in sixteen days. A thousand dollars in sixteen days would be nothing to a clever bride. But was Agnes clever?

Brooding upon possible deficiencies in her child, anger smouldered under Martha's activity. On the eve of her wedding, a girl ought to settle into a state of mind inviting confidences from her mother. It ought to be safe to point out responsibilities to her. But it certainly wouldn't be safe to point out responsibilities to Agnes, the way she was going on. No telling what she would do. She might even bridge her estrangement from her father, and consult with him—and then where would they all be?

Martha had to wait, and move cautiously, feeling the ground beneath her before she stepped.

Pursuing the paint business in his new store on the Square, Henry, too, was not unacquainted with grief. His failure to state facts to Agnes preyed upon him. And so, hazarding another attempt, he reaped another failure.

When Agnes was in the living-room one night, Henry dawdled with chores until Martha went up to sew. Then girding himself he retackled his hopeless job.

"Mother coming down again?" he asked.

Gathering paper streamers from a bolt of ribbon, Agnes prepared to leave.

"Sit still."

At a semblance of authority in the order Agnes let the streamers fall. Henry's courage oozed away. He wished she wouldn't look at him like a bird with a broken wing driven into a fence corner by a boy with a club.

There were peppermint lozenges in his pocket. He often carried them because, nibbled judiciously, they made up, in a way, for a smoke after dinner. Taking out a paper sack he held it towards Agnes.

"Have one?"

"No! I mean—no, thanks."

Peppermints proving a fiasco, he whipped himself to his original purpose.

Bulwarking his timidity behind a newspaper, he looked over the top and made ready to speak. Agnes saw, and laid down a frenzied barrage of words.

"Something wonderful—another present—came today," she piped. "Why Mama didn't show it to you I can't think. The box says Steele's Jewellery Store on top, but inside is so marvellous it must have been ordered from the city. Teapot and sugar bowl and lots of things besides. And guess what! It's from the whole town!"

The ruse worked. Henry was petrified with wonder and amazement. A present to his child from the town he loved!

"You don't say!" he breathed reverently. "A teapot and all—from your own town! Can I see?" He got up dizzily. "Kind of hard to take in. We've lived here a long time—but just the same—hard to take in."

For a full moment he stood studying the box and its label. From the whole town!

Fingering the silver inside gingerly lest oil and paint ground into his thumbs should rub off, he saw his persistent harassing of Agnes as inexcusable. It was brutal and stupid. A cannibal father would have had more sense and delicacy.

Remorse pierced him. El Stancias—the whole town of El Stancias—had been kinder than he to his Agnes.

CHAPTER XII

Stella was in the house, morning, noon, and night. Her eyes were pointed with envy, as to herself, she found flaws in all that was going on.

She resented the preparations going forward, and ridiculed them. Chairs and tables had been dragged around in a rabid hunt for dirt. Pictures hung at unrectified angles after their glasses and frames had been washed. The living-room was too small. With the whole town bent on coming to the wedding if it took a leg, how would a bridesmaid's dress show off?

" Why not hire a church ? " she suggested to Agnes. " It'd be bigger and more sacred besides."

En route to her room, Martha set Stella right.

" We do not have weddings in our church," she said. " Marriage is a human arrangement, not divine."

" I guess that tends to you, Ag," Stella sniggered when Martha was gone. " Human arrangement ! You bet your life it is."

" Mama'll want me to fit." Agnes did as she was constantly doing, tried to slide away.

" Lookit—let's talk." Stella closed the door to the hall. " Let's talk about your beau. I bet he knows it's a human arrangement—and not too darned nice human either. Hasn't he ever——"

" I've got to be fitted." Agnes edged warily for escape.

" Go on—tell." Stella stood her ground. " If you don't, I will. I'll tell something—for your own good too, Miss Smarty—because the first time you go getting nice on this deal you're going into, Lord help you ! "

" Agnes ! " came from upstairs.

Left alone Stella went to the dining-room and surveyed the presents on the table. What luck Agnes Barnet had. The item of Agnes' luck that irked most was that tea-set from the town. It was almost worse than the big engagement ring and other personal junk that now adorned the person of her friend. She could stand things coming another girl's way within reason, but she was opposed to landslides. Reconsidering her effort to drop a needed bug in Agnes' ear, she decided she'd let her find out what she needed to know in nature's way. If she didn't like it—so much the better.

" I'm going," she called dulcetly. " See you to-morrow."

Over her sewing machine Martha observed the demure child walking so prettily down the street.

" Stella's grown to such a lovely young woman," she said. " It would be nice if the right man came along for her, too."

Sighing, she returned to thoughts of the Cattleman's Bank and Agnes. During the last sweet days at home a girl should be tractable and receptive. But Agnes wasn't. She skittered, as she had done at the Oregon mills after she got her bracelet. An occurrence which might well have resulted disastrously had followed her skittering at the mills, and the slightest jar might precipitate an equally undesirable occurrence now.

The matter of the note terrified Martha. Agnes couldn't travel blithely away and send back dribbles as she had expected to do for Walter. Life was real, life was earnest, but there seemed to be no time or season to inform Agnes to that effect.

Martha prayed for a right time or season.

CHAPTER XIII

She might have saved her prayers. All Agnes seemed able to do was to dance over presents, and twist annoyingly when she was being fitted to clothes.

"But I want to see the back too!" she would affirm and squirm around to a mirror. "Isn't it fun!"

Fun! She thought of nothing but fun—and Martha wasn't having any fun. Time grew short with gruesome swiftness, and still no mention had been made of Mr. Thornquist and his extortionate thirty days.

On top of everything else she had to bear, Martha received word that Lettie was coming to the wedding. She hadn't been invited, but she had read announcements in the papers, and was inviting herself. Martha brooded over that as well as the note. It was pretty cheeky of Lettie. Agnes was no comfort. If only Agnes would behave Martha felt she might stand Lettie's coming. But Agnes was incomprehensible and inconsiderate and alarming. She gave the impression of a hysterical chipmunk that might run to cover in a hole at the crackling of a twig. But what cover

and what hole? And why—in the name of goodness—why? It was the mystery of why Agnes should run and take cover that rendered Martha incapable of action.

Then, as though she hadn't enough to contend with, William returned from his mountains a day before the wedding and wanted to know what ailed Agnes. Martha went into elaborate explanations. Girls had fittings at the last, and got into flurries. Lawson hung around for an hour and then retired to his car—like whoever it was that sulked in his tent.

Bad as that was, it nevertheless simplified things to have him out from under foot. If only Agnes would behave. There was no reason for such flighty conduct. Here it was—next to the last day before she went away—and Lettie coming, likely enough to get in the way—and nothing done about the note.

Just when she was ready to turn in and have a good lively fit of hysterics to clear the atmosphere, Martha saw something that should have been apparent all along.

She saw that the time to tell a girl that life was real, life was earnest, and that there was a note in the bank, was at the very last—when events crowded so close one upon the other that there was no time to be foolish, and nothing remained but to accept facts and face the music.

Comfort came only to be shaken again. Lettie arrived at four-fifteen of the day of the wedding, and she wore the alarming look of one who was going to perform a great work or know the reason why.

"We haven't a room in the house. I should think you would know that." Martha stood staunchly in the door with new dreads, embodied in the form of Lettie, outside.

"I don't want your room. I've got one at the hotel. I was going to wait and come with the crowd to-night. But I got to thinking. There's a lot to be said either to you or Agnes."

"Don't you dare say a word to Agnes," Martha defeated Lettie's flank movements to pass her. "Haven't you

any sense, Lettie Morgan ? Don't you know the state a girl is in on the day of her wedding ? Don't you realise——"

From the upstairs regions to which she had been banished for the day, Agnes heard voices. Leaning over the banister she saw the plump form of her aunt and squealed with delight.

" Tell her to come up," she shrilled to her mother. " Oh, what fun ! Come on up, Aunt Lettie, and see my things ! "

Selecting the lesser of two appalling evils, Martha made way. Agnes was on the landing. She strained her aunt to her, upsetting Lettie's hat and smashing her jabot flat.

" Come up ! Come up ! " She pulled the plump, rumpled little woman after her to her room. " Look ! " Pointing to a long slither of white satin, and a mist of tulle on the bed, she jumped and clapped her hands. " My dress ! And not home-made either. Ordered from San Francisco with the orange blossoms and all."

" Martha," Lettie began, getting the satin and tulle from the bed, " hang this up and make a place for that baby to sleep for an hour or two. She's in bad shape."

" I won't ! " The protest was strident. " I couldn't sleep if I tried."

Lettie took a hanger and draped the dress over it. Martha crisped. Officiousness could be carried too far. Lettie hung dress and veil on the post of the bureau. Satin and tulle descended in cataracts of mist and ice.

" Go down," Lettie said. " I'll sit with Agnes."

Martha took a chair. She was a rock against which Lettie might beat in vain. Stella would have to attend to affairs below. The green-house man was erecting an altar of lilies and smilax and palms. A musician was coming to rehearse on the newly-tuned piano. Fresh consignments of presents ought to be unwrapped and set out. It was preposterous for Lettie to hold work up as she was doing.

Unshaken in her seat Martha appraised her sister. For once in her life Lettie seemed to have a purpose. Lettie

with a purpose portended no good. If purposes were to be furthered with Agnes, the child's own mother surely had first call. In her present state, Agnes would be able to receive about so many impressions, and the one of the note must be printed first and most distinctly on her mind.

For all her dissent, Agnes had taken to bed. Her face lay flushed, and her hair was spread out. She looked almost tractable. The auspicious moment had come.

" Go look at the presents," Martha said to her sister. " I'll come right along in a minute."

Lettie resorted to strategy. She would decoy her sister away.

" Don't be long," she said, and left.

Martha shifted from her chair to the bed.

" My baby," she began, " we've been very close to each other, you and I. Nothing I could say to you in these last few hours that we have each other——"

" Don't ! " Agnes flung out a hand. It caught and tangled in a long lock of hair. " You promised——"

" But surely a mother, your own mother——" Martha caught the hand and the hair against her breast. The remembered infant fragrance of that hand and that hair came back to her. It penetrated the cells of her body and swelled them into units of pain. " Surely your own mother——"

Lettie reappeared in the door.

" I came back to get you," she said with ominous decision. " One needs a guide down there."

Martha rose from the bed.

" Try to sleep, dear." She bent and kissed Agnes. " Try to sleep."

Below, Lettie accorded only casual attention to gifts and decorations.

" Who's the girl ? " she whispered.

" Stella Winters." Pain had not left Martha. The hand and the brown hair might still have been against her breast. " You remember her. Agnes' best friend. Since

you're here, Lettie, you might as well unwrap those boxes and put the papers on the back porch."

" Oh—Agnes' friend ! " Lettie stood scrutinising Stella's back and the knowing tilt of her head. She'd overlooked the chance of a knowing friend for Agnes. Nevertheless, with Martha always remorselessly on her job——

" Is there some place we can talk ? " she asked.

" The kitchen." Martha submitted to what could not be avoided. " People from the hotel have been there all day, but they've gone to change for serving."

In the kitchen Lettie pulled a chair to the table. Martha brought another. They faced each other across the oil-cloth.

" Walter didn't come," Lettie said.

" So I see."

" I wouldn't let him. He couldn't be trusted."

" We'd have been delighted to have Walter," Martha said sarcastically.

" There's no use being caustic," Lettie replied. " I had a job to make him stay home and mind his business."

" That was thoughtful of you."

" But I'm not going to mind my business."

" Lettie, I've stood a great deal from you in the past. Once you came pretty close to killing me——"

" Leave that out now, Martha. Before I begin on what I'm going to do, there are questions to be asked. For instance, has Agnes the vaguest idea what she's doing ? "

Martha resorted to methods of dissolving the concrete with the amorphous.

" If you mean, was Agnes taken at the moment of maturity, like the daughter of a Fiji Islander, and initiated into disgusting things, I can only reply that she has been raised in a civilised community."

" Was it civilised for you to turn me over to Walter Morgan to learn from him a few simple rudiments you should have taught me yourself ? "

" I didn't turn you over to Walter. He was the last person I wanted to turn you over to. Any unpleasantness

resulting from that, you brought on yourself. The case under discussion is different. Agnes isn't running away."

"She'd stand a better chance if she were." Lettie could also be dramatic upon occasion. "Left to herself she might have found someone with Walter's patience and decency."

For her own sake as well as Lettie's, Martha had to further becloud the issue. It was being stated too clearly for comfort.

"You've never had children of your own," she said tolerantly. "You don't understand how sensitive a girl can be. I blundered once, trying to talk to Agnes, and ended by promising I would neither frighten her again myself, or let anybody else frighten her. I intend to keep my promise."

"And because you entered into a criminal understanding——"

"Now I have put her in God's hands." Bulwarked by recollection of her pledge, Martha proceeded more robustly. "No harm can come to her in His care."

"I'm not talking about God, and neither are you," Lettie flung out. "You've got Him mixed with Bill Lawson and can't tell which is which. What you're doing is giving that little girl to him to-night to take on to a private car alone. And I'm asking you, have you prepared her for being alone with a man who's known the length of the coast for his treatment of women?"

Martha grasped at the insult to William.

"I'm used to slander," she said. "It's all too plain what animates it. William, like all successful men, suffers from the tongues of the jealous and evil-minded."

"I guess you are the most unnatural woman that ever lived," Lettie commented.

Martha rose, splendid against outrageous flings.

"I'm busy," she said. "My suggestion is that you go back to the hotel and stay there until the next train leaves."

"Listen, Martha." Lettie kicked her chair out of her way. "I'll go to the hotel. I won't come to the wedding. I'll do whatever you say, if you'll tell me Agnes has been

given even a little protection. There's going to be a case of rape to-night——"

"Leave my house!" Martha was so aghast she could hardly speak. "You're as obscene as your husband."

"I know." Lettie subsided. "I know I'm obscene, but I've got to use words what there are. This wedding's going on. You want it, and so it's going on. But think about Agnes, too. Think about the morning she wakes up in the first nausea of pregnancy with Bill Lawson for a husband. She can't get away after that. How can she? Martha, don't close up like a clam and leave everything to God. Don't. There's small enough chance for women anyway. Leave a way open for Agnes to get out of what she's going into. Tell her something. You haven't lived to your age without hearing something. Tell her. Don't padlock her into this marriage by letting her have a child."

"I asked you to go——"

"Tell her. I know nothing's sure. I know if you had a sure thing you could sell it in the open market for a million dollars. But what you do know—even if it isn't sure——"

"Lettie, if you won't go peaceably——"

"I'll go. I've got my answer. You'll not do a thing. I'll go and come back."

"You're not asked to the wedding."

"I am asked. Since you're so glib about God, I'll tell you God asked me. As far as I can see, I'm the only one He invited."

Close to disintegration, Martha followed her to the door. Such defiant music as she had made to end the interview was so much noise. Through it she had heard Lettie's questions awakening her own. But it was too late to talk to Agnes. The pressure of last minutes, invoked for her own protection, had turned against her. How could she talk to Agnes now? And even if she could—there was the note at the Cattleman's State demanding precedence over everything else.

Her books were put away, but a great need had come, and she got them out.

Quietness conquered turmoil as she read. The soporific of familiar phrases took effect. There was no matter—all was mind. Agnes was exempt from harm. Lettie's warnings had risen from a welter of matter engendered by Walter Morgan, and did not pertain to those who breathed another element.

Neither words nor phrases were required to combat attacks on William. Her own instinct was sufficient. She who had long distrusted his sex, loved William Lawson. Such evidence of his worthiness was final.

Major fears dispersed, there remained only the problems of preventing Lettie's return to the house—and that of the note at the Cattleman's State. Now she was fortified even for the latter. Stowing her books away, she called softly down to Stella.

"Is your watch running, dear?"

Stella flipped the gold blob depending from her chatelaine, and said it was just five.

"Watch the man with the flowers, will you? Tell him to bank the lilies high against the palms. Agnes is asleep. Don't let anybody in to see her. At six you can run home and dress and come back at seven to be with Agnes. There won't be anything to eat here until supper afterwards."

"What'll I do about the trash lying around?"

"Henry will come directly and carry it out. Then the kitchen people can sweep up."

Ready for the ordeal of the note, Martha was nevertheless glad that Henry came in and delayed her.

"Stella'll tell you about the trash," she said to him. "When that's out of the way you'd better bathe and shave early, so you'll be out of the way."

Henry tackled the trash. With soft pedal well down, the musician was rehearsing. His chords were far, triumphant melodies. Still Martha delayed her portentous errand. She picked a thread from the carpet of her tidy room, meditated

over the good black lace and grey satin of the dress on her bed, and undid a new packet of hairpins. After that she went.

Agnes opened her eyes to the face bending above her. She had slept heavily. There were creases on one cheek from the pillow. Rubbing them lazily, she yawned. Martha made a soothing sound and stroked the damp, sweet hair. In a spasm of yearning she swooped and lifted the slim, relaxed young body against her breast. Its round bosom melted into her own, and the pain of its melting washed out to the confines of her own flesh.

" I love you, my daughter," she whispered. " Remember always that your mother loves you."

" Mother—my dearest ! " Agnes was closer than Martha's breath. The pain of her nearness was past all bearing. Martha put her away, and let the brown head fall to the pillow.

" There's something I have to tell you," she said.

Agnes was mystically calm. Sleep still hung about her.

Conviction that now was the time for all confidences smote Martha. But moments pressed, and the note at the bank came first.

" Yes ? " Agnes questioned.

" Business, dear." Martha gave the words a casual twist. " Business—just between you and me."

Agnes waited in her floating, mystical calm.

" I've always thought for you," Martha said. " Now the time has come for you to think of me."

" I'm thinking of you, Mama."

" But this specific thing—remember, it's been done for you."

" Why, of course."

" You'll have so much. The little I need——"

" Money ? " Agnes marvelled that the query did not start things tumbling inside her. It didn't, of course, because she was going to have so much of it that she'd never need to be afraid of money again. There would be no more firsts of months creeping up like execution days. " Oh,

yes—money," she said again. "I'll save up and send back even if I'm in London. Uncle Walter won't care how long it takes me to pay."

"The trouble is——" Martha went from bed to bureau and back again. "The trouble is—I didn't tell you because I wanted you to be happy during your last days at home—but your Uncle Walter refused to lend what we had to have."

"Then—how——" Agnes came up on an elbow.

Martha winced.

"I went to a bank," she said courageously. "I went to the Cattleman's State and signed a note."

The prop went from under Agnes, and she lay back motionless. Notes were like firsts of the month. They came due. She knew all about notes. Papa signed notes, and they had to be paid on time.

"Only a small one," Martha hastened. "I haven't been extravagant. Just a thousand dollars."

Agnes made no response. For all that the future, bulging with plenty, was only two hours away, things began tumbling inside her. A thousand dollars was so much.

"Don't be alarmed." Martha recurred to soothing sounds. "To-morrow you'll laugh about a mere thousand dollars. You're not getting into what I did when I married."

"Let's not say anything about Papa now."

"Very well." Martha stiffened. "What I came to say is that I signed for thirty days, and you must see that you send a thousand dollars to me within the next two weeks."

"Two weeks—but only two weeks—and a thousand dollars!"

"William is the soul of generosity," Martha gave the answer straight.

"I couldn't!" Agnes sat up. "So soon—I wouldn't have time to save. I'd have to ask. Banks renew notes, don't they? If you'd go to the Cattleman's and say——"

"They might require your father's signature on a renewal. We couldn't risk that, Agnes. Your father hasn't

good money sense, and you and I have to look after him. Leases on the Square are bringing a premium now. If he knew of the note, he'd pay it even if he had to sell his lease and move back to the old place. And being where he is, is his last chance. We couldn't risk his last chance, could we, dear?"

Dreams were gone from Agnes' eyes. She looked reality in the face.

"No," she said almost inaudibly. "We couldn't—not his last chance." Then suddenly she sat up again and began tugging at a finger. "But here—my ring—and the chain on the bureau—they cost more——"

Martha grasped the hand and shoved the ring firmly back.

"We can't be dishonest," she said. "William's gifts to you are a sacred trust."

Agnes fell to her pillow once more. Old torments had returned. A thousand dollars in such a short time! The heavy sum divided and became a thousand separate weights, rolling and pounding.

After excessive emotion, Martha was prone to irritation. Agnes lacked balance and perspective, she thought. Hopes of developing cleverness in her wavered. But, clever or not, the note had to be met.

"Well—are you going to stand by me as I have always stood by you?" she asked.

"I have to. I couldn't let Papa——"

"You've only to be what you would be anyway—a sweet little wife—and William will shower you with all he has. No need to go into details with him. Just send your surplus. You, at least, will never have to account to your husband for every cent."

Agnes tugged at the ring—pulling it over a joint and pushing it back. The repeated, senseless action hurt Martha as the child's bosom against her own had done.

"You're the dearest thing in the world to me," she said. "And you'll stand by."

" Yes." Agnes pulled at her ring. " Why—yes."

" I'll go look over the house, and maybe get a minute to read again." Martha looked for escape. " Stella's coming back at seven to be with you."

She went away and presently got out her books again. Now and then she looked in on Agnes. The child lay motionless except for her hands moving, pulling and shoving at the ring. When Stella came it was better.

" How pretty you look, dear," Martha said to her. " I'm glad we thought of the little pink veil. Can you girls manage while I dress ? If you need me, call."

In her room she brushed her hair violently. Tugs against her scalp diverted, somewhat, the torment around her heart. Why in the world did Agnes have to lie, pulling and pulling at her ring ?

In the chamber she had left, Agnes got from her bed very carefully. It seemed to her she was a kind of quartz that might break apart at any moment and fall in nothing but a heap of white dust.

Stella's black eyes were sharp beads back of her pink veil.

" What's up ? " she enquired.

" Why ? "

" You're not much of a bride, if you ask me."

" I've never been a bride before. How should——"

" If I were getting the world handed to me on a silver platter, I'd look as though I liked it."

" Don't I ? But I do. I'm having fun."

" You look it. How do you think little boy Billium's going to take a graven image in place of a sweet little wife ? "

Agnes made the thudding weights inside her crack together with sounds like laughter. It was easy to go on laughing once you started. Muscles between your ribs yanked, and the weights cracked.

" I'm having fun ! " Her voice shook convincingly.

She came from her bath, and the tent of an old chemise

that she would never need to wear again jigged gaily as she pulled garments of the best set on under it.

" Of course I'm having fun ! " Slim, and half-clad in gauze she threw the tent aside. Spots on her cheeks were like ruby glass with light behind.

CHAPTER XIV

Hidden by piles of paper and trash on the back porch Lettie watched for Henry to come into the kitchen. She had been there at seven, and it was seven forty-five before he came. Tapping on the glass of the door, Lettie saw that Martha hadn't put any new clothes over on Henry. He looked like an old-time gentleman out of a tin-type in the high white collar and wide velvet reveres of his own wedding suit.

" Why, Lettie ! " Letting her in, he reached to relieve her of a parcel under her arm. " That all the baggage you brought ? "

Lettie clamped the parcel tight, and her face pinched into a grimace of caution. Henry caught intimations of a secret, and glanced over his shoulder. Clad for serving, maids from the hotel were straightening the other rooms.

" Where's Walt ? " He peered outside. " Didn't Walt come ? "

" S-sh ! Walter's home."

" Glad you're here anyway." He'd always liked Lettie.

" Martha—I want to see Agnes first, alone," Lettie whispered.

Henry entered the conspiracy. The box was a surprise for Agnes. Another silver do-dad, like as not. He'd always had a weakness for surprises and games. What he'd missed most when Lettie went was that there were no more secret games. His eyes shone.

" Wait." He reconnoitred around the door. " I'll get

Martha away. Give me two minutes, then you scoot up to Agnes."

In her room, Martha tried not to be aggravated when Henry presented himself for repairs.

"My tie," he complained. It hung stringily down his shirt-front. "And a vest button popped."

Martha got her work-basket.

"If you'd ordered a suit as I wanted you to, there wouldn't have been an accident at the last minute," she said. "Where's the button?"

"It flew," Henry lied. He'd had to wrench it off and sequester it in a pocket. During the evening he'd drop it back of a palm and Martha would find it next day.

"This matches pretty well." Martha rattled the button bag. "Stand still. How do you think I can——"

He stood.

Lettie entered her old room without knocking. Agnes was dressed. Her face looked out between long falls of tulle. The jerking of her ribs had stopped for a time, and her face was the face of a child drowning in a waterfall. Stella knelt fastening orange blossoms where the veil lay on the floor.

"I want to see you alone." Lettie looked past the drowned face in the mirror to the pink veil shrouding Stella. Stella continued fastening orange blossoms. She straightened a billow of tulle. It was time to laugh again, and so Agnes touched the box under Lettie's arm. Another present to add to the dozens downstairs. What fun! Fun—and fun—and fun!

"Alone," Lettie repeated.

"About that?" Agnes pecked at the box. Her ribs yanked again, and ripples rose from her toes into her throat and along her arms.

"Yes," said Lettie.

"Oo Ah—what fun!" Agnes looked in the mirror to corroborate her statement of fun. She wore lace and tulle

and satin, with a chain of diamonds dripping down. And all it cost, for tulle and lace and diamonds and a thousand dollars besides, was just to be a sweet little wife.

But Aunt Lettie seemed scared. Maybe she thought what she had brought wouldn't suit. Silly Aunt Lettie—as though anything from her and Uncle Walter wouldn't suit. The box was done up in white paper like jewellers and druggists used. This was from a jeweller, of course. Agnes dived at the box.

"Alone." Lettie's arm was a vice. "I'm going to see you alone."

Agnes gathered clouds of tulle away from Stella's basting thread and pins—clouds and clouds. Nude of its mist, her satin train slid like ice on the floor.

"You'll have to wait," she laughed when Stella sat back comically on her heels. "Come on, Aunt Lettie—there's only the bathroom. Come on."

The train of ice slipped. It slid around the bathroom door and in. Following, Lettie clicked the key, and then sat down weakly on the wooden rim of the tub.

"I came—I brought—I had to come and bring——"

When it seemed difficult for Lettie to start, Agnes snuggled as close as clouds of tulle would allow.

"Show me!" she demanded. "Show me quick. I can't wait."

Lettie got a hand that turned and tightened in hers.

"I haven't time to be decent about this," she said. "Martha wouldn't give me time."

Excitement pitched back in Agnes' throat and became something else.

"I'll have to go!" She started up.

"Put it in your suit-case." Lettie thrust the box under the tulle. "It's probably no good on earth, but I talked to the druggist and he didn't seem to know any more than I——"

"Let me out of here!" A wheezing cry squeezed through the girl's throat. The box fell on a point and

slapped the floor. " Let me out—I'll never touch—I don't know what it is but I'll never touch——"

She stopped. The bathroom knob had turned.

" Daughter ? " came a clear, vibrant query.

" Coming ! " The answer was almost as clear.

" I have to run down for a minute again," Martha said. " Hurry. People will begin coming in a minute."

When she was gone Lettie stooped for the box.

" Take it," she said. " If you don't I'll call your father and raise a row." Pushing tulle aside she got the box under the girl's arm. " I hope you have sense enough—I hope and pray——" Her empty hands came together.

" Oh ! " she moaned, " Oh—oh—oh ! "

Agnes turned the key in the lock. Her train gleamed behind her for a moment like ice upon the floor, and then it too was gone.

CHAPTER XV

From the shelter of her rosy veil, Stella watched Agnes look wildly about the room, and then because there was no other place to hide it, stow a box in her suit-case under the folds of the night-gown of the best set, and rising wipe her hands, one against the other, like a bride in a trance.

" I'll finish the flowers," she said, and knelt again.

Agnes stood at the glass. Her mother passed to her own room through the hall. The front door opened and closed. Voices rose. They made the swelling sound, like an unoiled wheel gathering speed, that comes from a crowd. Done with orange blossoms, Stella brought the vast box with a San Francisco label, that Mr. Lawson had sent. Agnes took her bouquet. It was made of valley lilies and ghostly white things. They called them orchids. Her face in the glass was as ghostly as the orchids. She made it laugh, because it was time for fun again.

Martha hurried in.

"You might know your father would have something happen at the last," she said. "Here he is now. For goodness' sake come in, Henry. It's a minute past time. I told the music to wait, but it's starting now. That means you and Agnes have to go down. Crook your arm. Can't you crook your arm? Do I have to do even that for you?

"No—not you first, Stella. I go before the rest of you. Now Stella. Stella—where's your bouquet? That's right. You look so well in blue and pink. Pink roses set blue off, and the veil is sweet. The music's slow. Can you keep step to it going down? Yes, I know you can, Stella. It's Henry and Agnes worry me. Try, both of you—try—try—— Don't look so frozen, child. Try—try—try——"

The ice of the long train slid. Cloud upon cloud the steam of the long veil piled over it. Agnes felt herself going down, clinging to Papa, knocking against him when she lost her balance. Down——

Behind the bathroom door Lettie wrung her hands.

CHAPTER XVI

Weddings can be fun. Even your own wedding can be fun. All you have to do is to make your ribs jerk, and forget nameless frights, and Aunt Lettie, and notes at the Cattleman's State.

Your father swallows twice before he can tell the preacher who it is that gives this woman away. No use trying to hate Papa any more. It can't be done. He's sweet, he is, in his nice old clothes. Over his wide reveres he looks like a baby that had somehow got a brown and grey moustache.

A little way off, at one side, Mama is standing and twisting her mouth. Her eyes look straight ahead. It's as though she was seeing something for the first time—clear. Mustn't

do that, Mama. Mustn't see things clear. Look at all the wonderful blurs around—house and flowers and everybody in town and maids in black dresses waiting to serve at the kitchen door. That's Mr. Lawson in all the shirt-front and white kid gloves. Beside him stands Mr. Emmons. Mr. Emmons is president of the First National and he calls Papa, Hank. Why shouldn't he, when Papa has a store on the Square? Have to take care of Papa, because he hasn't good money sense and pays bills and notes. Notes—bank—store—all you have to do, Agnes Barnet, is to be a sweet little wife——

"I do." It's your own voice, Agnes Barnet's voice, coming from goodness knows where and saying that. To get down on your knees you have to knock against Mr. Lawson now, because you've lost your balance again and Papa isn't there any more. Prayers have to be said after the preacher. "Our Father Who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy note at the Cattleman's State——"

Those aren't the words. Crazy as a loon, you are. Crazy with so much fun. World on a silver platter——

Back, before all the people, Mama is choking—getting ready for a scream. Mustn't scream—nothing to scream for now, for ever and for ever. Amen. Barnet Paint and Glass on the Square. Mills and offices. A boom starting. Just think of a boom. "Oh Eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all mankind——" Don't scream, Mama. Don't. "Those whom God hath joined——"

How clever of Stella to strip down your glove. Never awkward—Stella. Mr. Emmons gives Mr. Lawson a thick, gold, heavy ring. Funny there isn't a diamond in it——

Mrs. Winters murmurs behind, telling Mama not to scream. Thanks, Mrs. Winters, thanks. Mustn't look at Mr. Lawson's hands or his feet that grip the floor with their sides turned in. That little joke carried far enough. Better think of Mr. Emmons calling Papa, Hank—and Stella so clever about gloves—and remember satin and tulle and orchids, with diamonds dripping down.

" That in the world to come you may have everlasting life. Amen."

Mr. Lawson's kiss smells of a drink, but Papa's comes next and takes the smell away. People swarm up like bees to an apple branch. Mama ! Mama—darlingest ! Don't let your mouth twist so ! Look at everything—and the dress and the diamonds and the strange white flowers—and remember the fun !

Maids in black dresses serve food. Stella pushes through the crowd.

" I'll help you change," she says. " Hurry."

The crazy, dancing picture of a wedding shattered around Agnes.

" Hurry ? " she asked.

" Hurry's right," Mr. Lawson said beside her. " The car is to be hooked on to the nine-three."

" Oh yes," Agnes recalled. " The car."

" Throw your bouquet." On the landing Stella nudged.

" Oh yes—my bouquet."

It fell, and Mr. Emmons' daughter got it. Only fifteen, and such a little girl, but catching the bouquet meant she would be the next happy bride.

" Don't cry, Mama, don't." Agnes said in her heart over the head of Mr. Emmons' daughter. " Oh, your poor twisting mouth ! "

Passing the bathroom she wondered if Aunt Lettie had slipped through the crowd and gone. Poor Aunt Lettie——

Out of one dress, she got into another. It was a lovely dress, grey lined with blue silk, and ordered from San Francisco. Under the grey hat a facing of blue made dark, lost pansies of her eyes.

Outside Mama cried to come in, but Mrs. Winters held her back. The suit-case, with the parcel inside, was strapped. Mr. Lawson's black man from the car pulled the straps and fastened the clasps and carried it away.

CHAPTER XVII

When Agnes left her room Martha clutched and pulled her up the hall.

"Tell me!" Tears were rivers down her face. "Tell me I was right to hurry you—before Eddie Michelson had time to come and—and——"

"Eddie?" Agnes' question was only the echo of a question. "What difference if Eddie came—what difference if anything——"

"In Doyle's lot. You never would tell——"

"I told all there was to tell."

"All?"

"Yes. Why Mama—why Mama darlingest!"

"Oh God! My God!"

Mrs. Winters got Martha away. Agnes wanted to follow, but Stella pushed her to the stairs.

"I'm going to the station," Henry said in the hall below. He wore an overcoat. "You stay here, Stella. I'm going."

Agnes put her hand on his arm. It felt good to take hold of him. No sound came from Mama upstairs. Thanks, Mrs. Winters, thanks.

How strange for Mama to speak of Eddie now, as though anything—as though Eddie—as though—— All one had to do was to be a sweet little wife.

Lines of people formed on the porch and down the steps. Mr. Lawson went first. Rice flew and fell. Mr. Lawson handed Agnes into the town's best hack. She crowded over and gave him most of the seat. Henry sat facing them. Rice rattled in the trimming of the grey hat.

Agnes leaned across and patted her father's knee. It meant that she didn't hate him, and never had. It meant that she loved him, and that he must tell Mama not to cry, and that everything was all right because she would be a sweet little wife.

The station came too soon. It stood up at the end of the

street and jumped forward to a stop when the hack stopped. Mr. Lawson got down.

" Nine-three's due." He looked at his watch. There was a watch at one end of his chain, and a cigar cutter with diamonds in it at the other. " You two wait here till I look the car over. Can't trust coons."

As he walked away Agnes looked at Henry, so as not to see Mr. Lawson walk. How strange for her mother to speak of Eddie.

Henry had nothing to say. He took his hat off and wiped the band inside. Mr. Lawson was at the end of the platform, coming back. Agnes grabbed her father's sleeve.

" Come with me ! " Her whisper was a cry. " Don't make me go alone ! "

Henry grabbed too, around both her arms.

" Daughter—if you don't want——"

Agnes made her ribs jerk and laughter come up.

" Of course I want," she said. " It's just—saying good-bye is so hard——"

Mr. Lawson came and felt big above her in the darkness. He seemed all spread out and everywhere, like the Holy Ghost in Luke. Agnes kissed her father and went with Mr. Lawson. She walked down the platform keeping her eyes on her own feet. Even when Mr. Lawson pushed a hand under her arm and pressed it against her side, she kept her eyes on her own feet.

She went on saying " Good-bye, Papa," over and over to herself without moving her lips. " Good-bye, Papa—good-bye."

Mr. Lawson boosted her to the platform of his car. The nine-three roared in and shot couplings with a noise like cannons. Agnes bumped inside the car and grasped the first chair she saw—hard.

" My," she explained. " I can't stand up."

The coloured man had her suit-case. He put it inside a glossy door. Behind the door was a room with a bed that had its sheets turned down. She faced away from the room

to the window. The nine-three pulled and screamed and got under way. Darkness swept the window like a brush of black paint. Sweeping darkness, it was—like a brush.

The coloured man asked if there was more to do.

" Get out," Mr. Lawson said. " Mush on ! "

Glittering black paint brushed the window. The car had taken the down grade. It was racing down.

Mr. Lawson stooped to lift Agnes in his arms. She wriggled away, hunting for a place to run. The black brush shut off all but the glossy door. She flung towards it, and saw the bed again.

" I forgot ! " She pulled the door shut against her back. " I forgot something ! Stop the train ! I forgot—I forgot and I've got to go back——"

Mr. Lawson reached. She writhed and struggled in his arms.

" I'll give you ten minutes." His mouth found her throat and his nostrils sucked at her hair. " Ten minutes—you smell like a peeled young twig of sapling—I'll give you ten minutes——"

" I've got to go back ! " She struck at the sliding, gluttonous mouth. " I've got to go back ! "

" I'll hold my watch, and in ten minutes——"

" Stop the train ! Stop the train, I tell you ! O-o-oh ! "

Her cry died inside the glossy door. He was outside—holding his watch.

Trains wouldn't stop ! Nobody could stop trains ! She found a bolt on the door that turned with a silver click. It wasn't strong—just a silver, clicking bolt. She found other things to fortify the bolt. She dragged Mr. Lawson's bags up, and piled her own on top. She tugged and strained at the bed to get it out against the bags. It was built to the wall and wouldn't budge. The bench was built to the wall. Everything was built to the wall. Nothing held the door but a silver click and some bags.

" Time's up." The silver latch above the bolt knob turned. " Say—what's this ? Open the door ! "

Bolt and bags and suit-case wouldn't hold. But one could fight. Unsnapping her suit-case she got a brush and mirror. They were heavy. When bolt and bags gave way—she could fight!

"Time's up, I say," Mr. Lawson called. "You little hellion—open the door." The latch lashed, this way and that.

Crouching against the bed, Agnes settled brush and mirror handles deep in the sockets of her palms.

"None of that, now! Let me in, I say!"

When he heaved his weight and the bolt gave way, she could fight. The glass of the mirror would break and cut——

"Say! A complaining, sullen voice. Say—this is a hell of a way for a sweet little wife——"

Brush and mirror lifted, hung—and fell. Sweet little wife. Cattleman's State——

Hauling, pushing, scrambling, she got bags and case away. The handle lashed. She turned the knob and the silver bolt clicked back.

"Well!" Mr. Lawson nearly fell through the yielding door. "What's the idea?"

"I—nothing. I—I just—wasn't ready——"

"I should say you're not ready." He looked resentfully at the slanting, grey hat, and the dark, lost pansies under it. "I should say you're not. Well, I won't risk that again. Don't want to have to smash my own car. I'll stay here now——"

He stood in the door, body bent forward from the waist, swaying to the swaying of the car. His hands hung down, and his feet were turned in until their outer edges gripped the floor. He looked like an ape.

THE END

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